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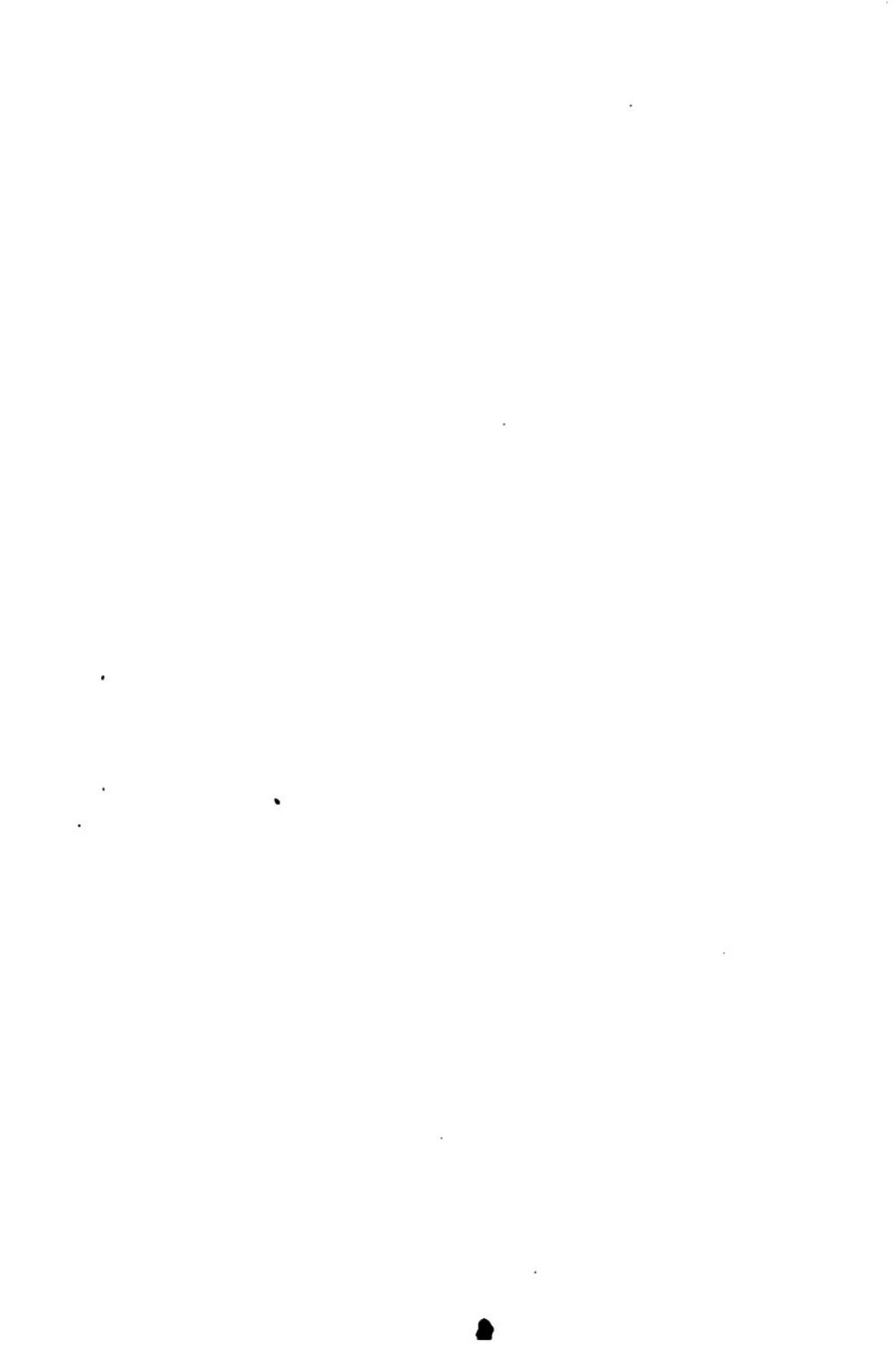
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ARTES SCIENTIA VERITA

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Cherub Devine

A NOVEL

By

Sewell Ford



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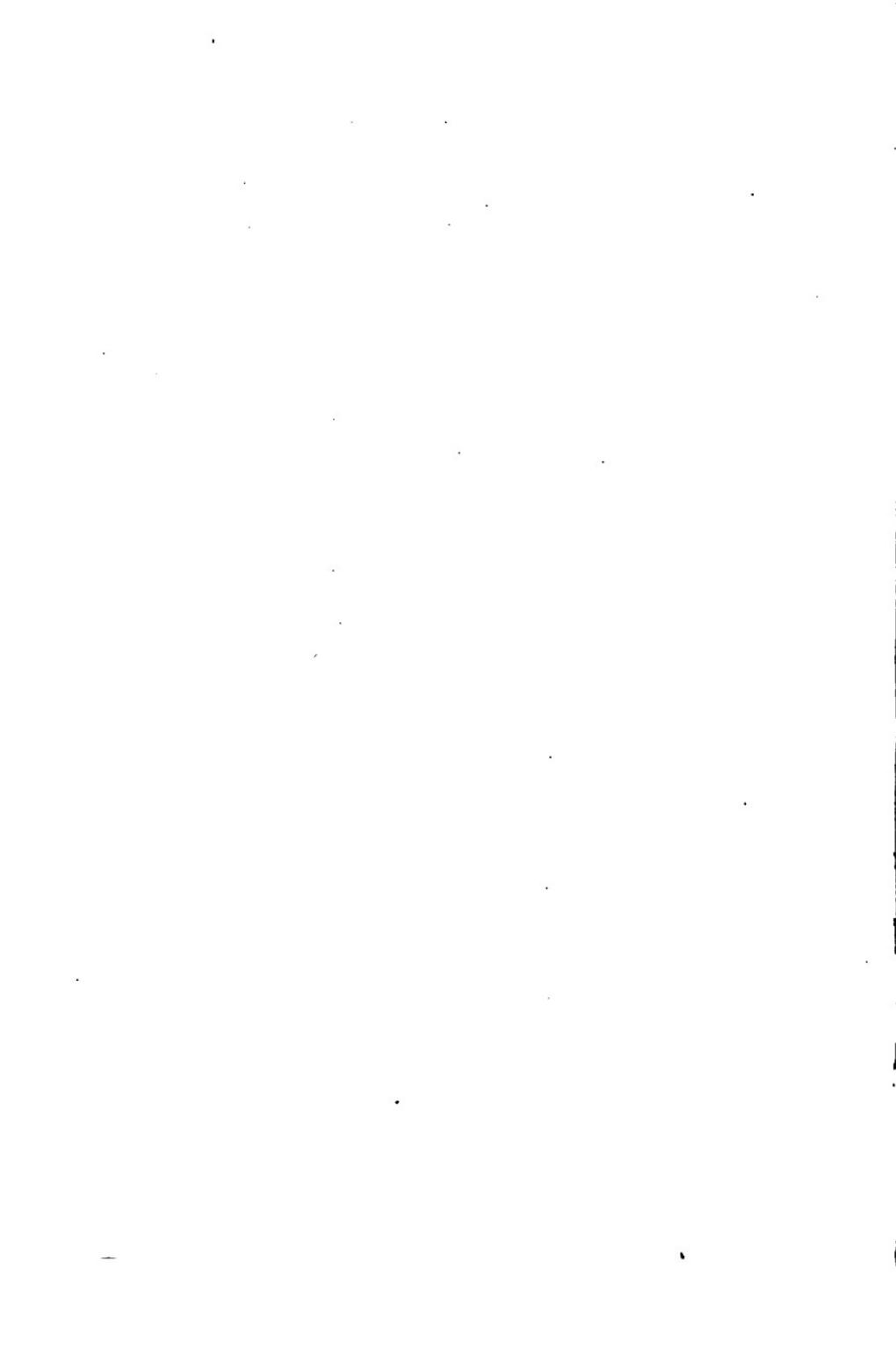
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CHERUB DEVINE

I

THOSE who doubt that fate now and then indulges in irony should have observed the manner in which Hewington Acres came into the possession of "Cherub" Devine.

Bulkins, the real-estate agent who made the sale, attributes the whole credit of the transaction to his own shrewdness. But, then, Bulkins is one of those persons who would cheerfully call upon the entire universe to prove that he, Bulkins, was favoured above all other men in that respect. Does the sun shine? Bulkins knew it would, and for his profit. There comes a storm. Bulkins appropriates it, wrings a percentage therefrom, and winks confidently at the solar system whose opera-

tions are conducted for his especial and particular benefit. Had he lived in Noah's time he would have claimed the flood, and you would have found him selling water frontage around Ararat before Shem, Ham and Japhet had rolled out of their bunks.

"I can sell anything, anywhere." This was Bulkins' philosophy, his religion, his declaration of faith in himself. Faith in things other than himself Bulkins lacked. Possibly you know the type. It is not rare.

As a matter of fact, when Bulkins suggested the purchase of Hewington Acres to "Cherub" Devine, he thought he was saying something exquisitely humorous. In truth, it was rather a good joke, of the kind; for if Mr. Devine was anything at all, he was citified. There are some individuals, you know, who seem particularly adapted to urban conditions. You can no

more imagine them existing away from telephones, electric lights and pavements, than you can picture a street car in the middle of a ten-acre cow pasture.

And, of course, Bulkins knew the habits and ways of "Cherub" Devine. Every one knew them. Any one—the man in the street, the clerk behind the counter, the very newsboys at the curb—could tell you all about "Cherub," give you his entire history, from the time he started his career as office boy for a Chicago stock broker, until he evolved into the many-millioned speculator whose audacious methods were at that moment stirring things up in Wall Street. Each and every one could have told you exactly the kind of man he was—and missed the mark widely.

For such men are not so easily estimated. Even in this somewhat intimate record of his doings, no such comprehensive analysis will be attempted. Certain obvious char-

acteristics, however, may be set down. Buoyancy of soul is one. Perhaps that is not one of the well-recognized points in the conventional formula of personal description. But nothing else seems to fit so well that peculiar quality of disposition, manner, spirit, character—what you will—which distinguished him from his fellows. But buoyant he was.

Perhaps it was this, visible in his wide-set blue eyes, with the flashes of light behind; perhaps it was only the pink chubbiness of his cleanly shaven face, which earned him the name of "Cherub," a designation applied impartially by pert messenger boys, irreverent brokers and staid heads of great corporations. He had been christened otherwise, of course; and possibly "Cherub" was inappropriate, when you consider all that he was, or seemed to be; but the designation was universally accepted, as you know.

Just where he might be expected to be found, Bulkins had run across him, seated comfortably in a leather-covered, wide-armed office chair at an open window which looked out across Broad Street towards the more or less ornate front of the New York Stock Exchange. For more than an hour Mr. Devine had been thus seated, watching with little show of interest the unimpressive street scene below. Surely there could be nothing novel for him to see, for he had watched it hundreds of times before.

The time was a little past noon of an August Saturday. Therefore the stream of men was setting outward between the great pillars. The curb was lined with hansoms and autos, and into these climbed brokers, variously attired, variously burdened. Here came one in blue serge, wearing a yachting cap; there two who swung golf bags in their hands; others were followed by boys carrying kit bags.

Mr. Devine saw nothing unusual in this. These brokers were bound for their yachts and country places. Hence the kit bags, the golf sticks, the caps. They were off to join their families, their guests. And possibly the buoyant bachelor soul of "Cherub" Devine felt a little twinge of loneliness, of isolation. Who knows? He may have been entirely complacent. He appeared so.

At any rate, Bulkins happened in just then. Did he perceive the psychological moment? No. Bulkins couldn't have told you whether psychological meant a pain in your back, or a new germ. What he saw was "Cherub" Devine, who was said to have been a heavy loser in the day's trading which had just closed. So, with that delicacy of feeling peculiar to his class, and perhaps prompted by a desire to display the intimacy which he voluntarily thrust upon all men of affairs who would not too

strongly resent it, he stepped briskly over to the window and slapped smartly the broad shoulder which rose above the chair back.

“Hello, Cherub! They got after you today, eh? Planning how to get even, are you?”

Mr. Devine showed no resentment. He glanced leisurely up at Bulkins, allowed his level gaze to rest for a moment on the placid features, the heavy-bagged, starey eyes, and then resumed his contemplation of the street below.

“Maybe I was,” said he.

Bulkins snorted out a mirthless laugh, for it was generally understood that the “Cherub’s” retorts were of a humorous nature.

“Good! Sic ‘em, my boy! That’s what I’d do. When they think they’ve got me beat worst I bob up and go at ‘em hardest. But say, you ought to take a rest

once in a while. Does a man good. You ought——”

And it was just there that Bulkins had his inspiration. He grinned broadly.

“Oh, I say, Cherub,” dropping his tone to a hoarse, crooning note which he imagined peculiarly persuasive, “I’ve got just the thing you ought to have—a country place.”

“Yes?” Mr. Devine acknowledged the joke by flicking half an inch of cigar ash on the window ledge.

“You bet!” Bulkins was smoothing “Cherub’s” coat sleeve. “It’s Hewington Acres—up on the Sound—gilt-edged suburban property, and going dirt cheap on foreclosure. You know about the Hewingtons; swell family, but gone all to smash financially. Now there’s twenty acres of park along the water, nice little forty-room cottage——”

“Only forty?”

"With stables, lodge house, gardener's shack and the like. It's fully furnished and goes as it stands, even to the servants, if you want them. Just the place for a family man like you!" And Bulkins snorted a fresh appreciation of his own humour, winking roguishly at an astonished broker's clerk who happened to be passing.

Mr. Devine seemed to have missed the joke.

"How much?" he asked, his gaze still fixed on the stone steps opposite.

Bulkins checked another snort. His little eyes narrowed as they concentrated on the rounded profile of Mr. Devine.

"Receivers would take sixty thousand, but it's worth double. That's as sure as I'm standing here. I tell you, Cherub, that property——"

"I'll take it," said the "Cherub."

"Eh?" Bulkins' pendulous under lip was sagging away from his yellow teeth.

"I said I'd take it at sixty. What do you want to bind the bargain—ten thousand? Fifteen? Well, call it fifteen," and before that under lip of Bulkins' had stiffened he was holding "Cherub's" check in his hands.

Observed Bulkins afterward, when he had mentally added his commission to his bank account and recovered from his surprise: "Now some men would have been six months turning over a property like that; but me, I unload it on the first sucker I meet. Though what in thunder Devine wants of a place like Hewington Acres is more'n I can see."

Apparently "Cherub" had no immediate use for it, since he allowed three weeks to elapse without referring to the transaction, except to toss the deed over to a clerk and tell him to have it recorded. He seemed to forget all about it until one Friday afternoon when he found himself with a "clos-

ing" Saturday, a Sunday and an ensuing Monday holiday on his hands.

"Better come with me for a run into the Berkshires, Cherub, and help me try out my new machine," urged Willston, one of the "Chicago crowd," whose hobby was buying another and more expensive touring car every month or so.

"Thanks, but I guess I'm about due out at my place on the Sound."

"Wha-a-at! You don't mean to say you've set up a country establishment?" And Willston gave him an incredulous look.

"Didn't have to—bought it all standing. Haven't seen it yet. It's out—Well, say, blamed if I know just where it is. Boy! Ring up Bulkins, real estate."

Having summoned Bulkins to the other end of the wire Mr. Devine proceeded to ask enlightenment.

"That you, Bulkins? Well, this is De-

vine. Say, what's the name of that place you sold me? Eh? Howlington Acres? Oh, Hew-ing-ton! Good! And where is it? Yes, *where?* No, how should I know? Ah, that's it, is it? Guess I can remember. But how do you get there? Sure, Thirty-fourth Street ferry. Thanks. So long."

And ten minutes later Mr. Devine had started on his voyage of discovery into the fashionable wilds of Long Island, bent on inspecting the first piece of real estate which he had ever owned, the first tangible fruits of his newly acquired millions.

II

OWING to the foresight of Bulkins, who had sent a warning telegram in advance, Mr. Devine was met at the station by one Timmins, who singled him out with unerring promptness, introduced himself as caretaker and general superintendent of Hewington Acres, and waved him obsequiously towards a yellow-wheeled park trap drawn by a pair of glossy cobs. A sharp-nosed, ferret-eyed, undersized little man, was Timmins; one of that class of Englishmen who seem born to serve. He had handed the "Cherub" into the trap and taken the reins from a groom when he felt himself tapped on the shoulder.

"Whose team?" Mr. Devine was asking.

"Yours, sir."

"That so! Wait a minute."

Mr. Devine got out and walked around the rig twice, eying the outfit as curiously as a boy does an unopened Christmas bundle. Then he climbed in again.

"It's all right, Timmins. Let 'er go."

The groom smiled. Timmins did not. He murmured "Yes, sir," waved the whip towards his hat, and sent the horses swinging around an oval canna bed at a clip which made the "Cherub" hold fast with both hands. Not until the high-stepping cobs had whirled him over half a mile of sand-papered macadam did he venture to loosen his grip and lean back against the cushions. No one will ever know just how much "Cherub" Devine enjoyed that ride, or the sensation he experienced when they turned in through the big stone gate posts and Timmins remarked cheerfully, "Here we are, sir." Mr. Devine has tried since to tell how he felt about it, with indifferent success.

At the moment he did not try. He said nothing at all, even when at the last curve of the driveway the trees seemed suddenly to open and there sprang into view the low-roofed, many-windowed, much-awninged "cottage," with its *porte-cochère*, servants' annex, glass-roofed conservatories and deep verandas. As if released by a spring, there appeared in the doorway a solemn-faced butler, who took his travelling bag and stepped stiffly aside.

"Show you through the house first, sir?" suggested Timmins.

"Might as well."

Mr. Devine was lighting a black cigar. This accomplished, he followed Timmins into the darkened vista of hall and through the large rooms. As Bulkins had assured him, the place was fully furnished. There were chairs, tables, rugs, books, pictures, even freshly cut flowers in the vases.

"Up stairs now, sir?"

"Oh, I guess the up stairs'll keep. Let's have a look at the stable."

Inside of half an hour the "Cherub" was smoking lonesomely on the front veranda, trying to summon a sense of ownership which it seemed to him impossible that he could ever achieve. The place was all so empty and still! He looked up and down the long bare veranda, then out across the vividly green lawn. No one was in sight. Behind him were those many darkened rooms from which issued no sounds. The shades of all the front windows were drawn, and the yellow and white awnings masked them still more. It was as if the place had been put to sleep by a mesmerist. He wished he knew how to wake it up.

Usually a man much given to silence, even among his intimates, Mr. Devine now felt that he wanted to talk. The stillness was oppressive. He longed to break it or, at least, to hear it broken. There must be

servants back in there somewhere. Why couldn't they slam a door, or break a few dishes? So this was what it was like to own a country place, was it?

"Fine thing, the country," soliloquized Mr. Devine. "I could spend just about a week here—and then die of it."

Somehow the sound of his own voice, although he unconsciously spoke in a hushed tone, made him nervous. He got up, pushed the chair from him irritably, and strolled into the house.

"I'll get lost in here and then yell for help, that's what I'll do," he declared. "There'll be some excitement in that, maybe."

So he wandered into the drawing-room, looked at the pictures on the wall, sat down on a couch, tried a chair, and threw some ashes on a rug, just by way of self-assertion. But it was no use. He found himself tiptoeing over the bare spots of the

polished floor as stealthily as if he were a burglar. Then he chuckled, planted his feet firmly, and walked into the library. As he did so he heard a muffled exclamation, and caught a glimpse of a skirt whisking through a door. A distant clicking of heels convinced him that he had just frightened some one from the room. An easy-chair pulled up before an open bookcase caught his eye.

“Hello! I wonder who that was?”

Naturally, there was no reply. Mr. Devine went to the door through which he had seen the skirt whisked, and found a push button on the jamb. He put his thumb on it and waited.

“Did you ring, sir?” asked a sepulchral voice behind him.

Mr. Devine jumped and turned to see the solemn-faced butler.

“Who else would ring if I didn’t?” demanded the “Cherub.”

"No one, sir."

"Sure about that, are you?"

"Quite sure, sir."

"Well, I'm not. Some one just skipped out of this room as I came in. Who was it?"

"Likely one of the maids, sir."

"Do the maids have the run of the book-case, eh? She was sitting here. The chair's warm."

"Might have been the 'ousekeeper, sir; Mrs. Timmins, sir."

"She's a reader, is she? Well, tell her not to be so skittish next time. It gives me the fidgets."

"Yes, sir. I'll tell her, sir."

Evidently he was in a hurry to carry out his instructions, for before Mr. Devine could say anything more the man had retreated as silently and abruptly as he had come.

"Wonder if they're all that kind?" com-

mented the "Cherub." "Guess I'll have to hang sleigh bells on 'em if I want to dodge a case of nerves."

Dropping into the easy-chair, he began reading the titles on the backs of the volumes before him. So all these books were his, were they? Well, that was odd. Some day he might want to do a little reading. He had always meant to but——

Something white on the floor between the chair and the wall caught his eye. He stooped and picked up a handkerchief. It was a dainty affair, mostly lace, and there was an initial in the corner, an embroidered V with some sort of a little pointed crown above it.

"H-m-m!" said the "Cherub," "V can't stand for Timmins."

Having made this subtle deduction, he pocketed the handkerchief and started to look for the factotum who was caretaker and superintendent, and whose wife

was the housekeeper. The search was not a long one, and ended at the stable office.

"Timmins," said Mr. Devine, "what sized force are we carrying?"

"Beg pardon, sir, but—" Timmins caught himself abruptly. "Oh, you mean how many in help? Only five now, sir, outside of me and Mrs. Timmins."

"Five, eh—and two are seven? Let's see the pay roll, will you?"

Timmins produced an account book in which were entered names, dates and amounts. Mr. Devine glanced hastily through the list.

"None of 'em seem to have a V in their names," suggested the "Cherub."

"A V, sir?" Timmins' blank look was wholly convincing.

"Maybe you never heard of any one whose name began with a V, Timmins?"

"Oh, yes, sir. There was the Venables,

sir, as used to visit here; and Volkenberg, who was one of the gardeners."

"That all?"

"There might be others, sir, if I could lay my tongue to—"

"Don't strain your memory, Timmins. It doesn't matter."

Yet when he had returned to the veranda to resume his contemplation of the vividly green lawn, over which the tree shadows were now lengthening, he could not rid himself of the notion that somewhere about this big house, of which he was trying to convince himself that he was the owner, was a person who had not thus far been accounted for. Moreover, the person was a woman. Mr. Devine moved uneasily in his chair. As he occasionally expressed it, and as his practice more eloquently attested, women were "not in his line." But who was she? And why was she there? At this stage of his reflection Mr. Devine chuckled.

"I'll be seeing ghosts next," he told himself.

Of course, it was all nonsense. Everything about the place was strange to him. He did not even know where the servants kept themselves, or what they were supposed to do. The whole venture, he now saw, was ridiculous. The idea of his owning a house of forty rooms, a house away off in the country among the trees! Well, he would stay in it one night, and in the morning he would go back to his hotel. Hewington Acres would be for sale at a bargain inside of forty-eight hours. He was just consulting the railroad time table when dinner was announced.

Once more did Mr. Devine indulge in a chuckle at his own expense when he found himself seated alone in the big dining-room, a single plate laid at the big round table, and the candle light barely suggesting the dim corners and the cavernous fire-

place. It was with a sense of relief that he saw the butler emerge from the gloom.

"Let's see, what's your name?" he asked of this personage.

"Eppings, sir. Soup, sir?" Both reply and question were sepulchral in tone.

"Yes, I'll have some soup. Grandmother dead, is she?"

"Beg pardon, sir." Eppings paused with his hand on the tureen cover.

"Grandmother dead?" repeated Mr. Devine.

"She is, sir."

"Thought so. Mine is, too. But cheer up, you'll get over it."

"Thank you, sir."

It was all Eppings could think of at the moment, for he was much puzzled. A dignified and solemn silence ensued until the fish was brought in. Mr. Devine said he would have fish, too.

"And Epsoms—" he added.

"Beg pardon, sir; Eppings, sir."

"Well, Eppings then, you really must forget about that lost grandmother of yours."

"Ye-e-es, sir. I'll try, sir. Will you have the sauterne now, sir?" Eppings displayed a dust-covered bottle.

"No, no. Milk for me, Eppings, always milk. Remember that I've drowned the memory of two grandmothers, Eppings, and I never used anything stronger than milk."

It was not often that the "Cherub" attempted a joke all by himself. Perhaps that was why this one so sadly miscarried.

"Most hextraordinary man, the new master," reported Eppings in the servants' quarters. "Thinks I'm mourning for my grandmother when, bless me, the old lady's dead and gone these twenty years."

"They say he's an awfully wild young man," commented Mrs. Timmins, the

housekeeper, who was as stout and as aggressive as Timmins was thin and ebse-
quious. "I've heard that he cuts up some-
thing scandalous and gets his name in the
papers. But I've warned my man, Tim-
mins, that I won't stand it. 'Timmins,'
says I, 'the very first moment that Mr.
Devine begins to carry on here we leaves.
We've always had service with well-be-
haved gentlefolks, and them's the kind I
want to be with.' That's what I told him,
straight and flat, and I ain't goin' to see
Timmins led into all sorts of deviltry, no
matter how rich the folks are that does it.
No, sir!" And Mrs. Timmins dropped
her broad palms defiantly on her substan-
tial hips.

III

MEANWHILE Mr. Devine was finding out what it was like to be alone in the country at night. He began by sitting under the outside porch light and staring into the dark. This proving unsatisfactory, he moved farther and farther from the light radius until he had reached the outermost limit of the veranda. Next he ventured on little excursions out around the lawn, but keeping the lighted doorway in sight. He shuddered to think what would happen to him if he should lose it, or some one should turn off the light.

Then he witnessed a miracle: the red moon peered over the black tree tops, and gradually there emerged a weird, fantastic landscape, wholly unlike the one which he had watched before dinner. Detached

trees and clumps of shrubbery seemed to float in pools of inky blackness. Strolling cautiously out into this archipelago, Mr. Devine marvelled at the increased bulk of the cottage.

"Looks as big as the Madison Square Garden," he commented. "Wonder how she'd show off if she was all lighted up?"

Then, getting a new angle, he perceived four yellow rectangles in an upper story. They were windows which faced the rear.

"That's where the help stays, eh?"

No, now that he remembered, the servants' quarters were in another wing. A few steps more brought it in view, and there were more lighted windows. He returned to cast a perplexed gaze at the four yellow rectangles. He could make out a shadow on one. It was the silhouette of a man's head, a man with a beard and eyeglasses. He seemed to be reading. Then another shadow flitted across the shade, a

slighter, more graceful shape, evidently a woman's.

"Nothing ghostly about that," remarked the "Cherub." "Am I in a boarding-house, or what?"

Finding a lawn seat, he swung it around, lighted a fresh cigar, and leaned back to make a comfortable survey and reflect upon his discovery at leisure. Instead of one there were two persons for whom he could not account. Perhaps there were more—four, five, six, a dozen. Why not? Room was not lacking. True, he had been given to understand, both by Bulkins and by Timmins, that he had bought a house tenanted only by servants. But persons who read books in the library, dropped lace handkerchiefs, and occupied rooms in the main portion of the house, could not be servants. Either some deception was being practised or he had been singularly dense of comprehension. He was inclined to

take the latter view, but found some difficulty in accepting it.

However, he was not disturbed. Mr. Devine was not one to imagine himself imposed upon. Even very real grievances he shook off easily, such was the fortunate make-up of his disposition. So he smoked placidly in the moonlight and waited. The profile of the spectacled, bearded man remained fixed on the shade, barely moving. The other came and went at intervals, now bending over the man, now pausing at a little distance, now disappearing for several minutes at a time.

At last two of the windows were darkened. After an interval he saw in one of them a glimmer of whiteness. Mr. Devine could imagine a pair of white arms, elbows on the ledge, and a dark head between. So intently was he occupied in trying to pierce the shadows that his cigar went out. He struck a match to relight it.

This done he looked again at the darkened windows and discovered that the shutters had been closed. The other windows were still lighted, and the shadow of a man reading remained.

Now Mr. Devine would undoubtedly have denied, had there been any one to ask him, that he was curious about all this. Centuries ago some half-baked philosopher solemnly announced that curiosity was a feminine trait, quoting Eve and Mrs. Bluebeard No. 18—or was she No. 20?—as examples. He got himself believed, and ever since then men have been pretending to a lack of curiosity with as much insistence as if it was one of the cardinal virtues. So the theory has become widely accepted, although every wife can tell you of at least one exception.

But the “Cherub” was alone, unobserved. And he was curious. He wondered and speculated and made wild guesses

as to the identity of the persons in those upper rooms. Having no starting-point, no clue to follow, he arrived nowhere. Not a single plausible suggestion occurred to him. He wanted to ask a thousand questions of some one. But of whom? If Eppings had lied before, he would again. So with Timmins. And perhaps, after all, the explanation was perfectly simple. If so, he might be made to appear curious. So he forced a yawn.

"Give it up," he said. "Guess I'll go to bed."

That is what he did, too, comfortably assuring himself of an incurious mind. The fact that he eventually went to sleep added to his assurance that he was free from the conspicuous feminine trait.

Why he should rise at the unearthly hour of six, however, he explained in quite a different way. He accused a few twittering sparrows of waking him. Perhaps,

too, it was the sparrows which drove him out to make a circuit of the grounds. Quite incidentally he glanced up at the windows he had watched the night before. The closed shutters revealed nothing. He wandered on and found himself in a flower garden, where there were arbours and gravel walks and stone seats. The beds were laid out regularly, the bushes evenly clipped, and the walks neatly raked. It reminded him of a city park, and he felt somewhat more at home.

Finding a bench under a tree, he sat down and began to wonder how long it would be before he might call for his breakfast without seeming unreasonable. He was still grappling with this unusual domestic problem, absorbed in the revelation as to how ignorant he was of such matters, when he was aroused by a crunch, crunch of footsteps on the gravel. Some one was walking down one of the intersecting paths.

By leaning forward he could catch sight of them as they passed. It was not a particularly dignified attitude, nor one wholly comfortable for a man of Mr. Devine's build to assume; but lean forward he did, his head tilted a little to one side, an elbow on one knee—a frankly attentive posture. He wished to see who else was stirring so early in the morning.

Well, he saw. During the brief instant that he stared he had a glimpse of a slender, big-eyed young woman, whose hair hung in a thick, dark braid over one shoulder. Across the hollow of her left arm was a sheaf of freshly cut flowers, in her right hand a pair of shears. And then she saw him.

“Oh!”

Down fell the roses. The shears clattered on the stones.

This manœuvre was too much for the “Cherub.” He lost his balance and pitched

forward on hands and knees. His straw hat struck on the brim and rolled to the further edge of the walk. By the time he could scramble to his feet and recover his hat the young woman had gathered up her flowers and the shears. She stood quite still, eying him with apprehensive expectation.

“Eh?” said the “Cherub.”

“I—I said nothing,” replied the young woman.

“But you squealed, didn’t you?”

“Possibly.”

“Scared, were you?”

“I was startled.”

“Well, I was scared out of a year’s growth. Next time you feel like squealing you might send me word, so I can brace myself. Live here, do you?”

“Why—er—that is—not exactly.”

“Neither do I. Thank the Lord, I just own the place. But don’t mind me. Go ahead with your possey picking.”

" You—you don't object to——"

" Great Scott, no! Cut 'em all, if you like. I'll clear out."

" Oh, no. Please don't. I am going now. Really, I was about to go."

" All right. Suit yourself."

Only after she was out of sight did Mr. Devine realize that here was another person whose presence at Hewington Acres was not fully accounted for. What was it she had said when he had asked her if she lived there? Not exactly! She could not be one of the servants. He was sure of that. Just why he was sure of it he could not have told, but the possibility was so absurd as to be dismissed the moment the thought came to him. But when you find a person about the grounds of a private house, apparently quite at home, and they reply when asked if they live there, "not exactly," what is one to infer? She couldn't be a guest. Who was there for her to visit? Nor a boarder.

"Strikes me I ought to take a census," commented the "Cherub." "Anyway, I might have asked if she came from the top floor."

One thing he was now decided upon, and that was that he would stay the day through, at least. He would make no inquiries, just wait and see what would happen. A place so fertile in surprises as Hewington Acres could be endured for a few more hours, even if it *was* in the country. Going back to the house, he rang a bell until Eppings appeared, heavy-eyed and lugubrious.

"Breakfast ready yet?"

"Breakfast, sir? It's rather early, sir, but——"

"Early! It's the middle of the forenoon. Go stir things up in the kitchen."

"Yes, sir; at once, sir."

As Eppings departed the hall clock chimed seven. The "Cherub" grinned.

He had not breakfasted at seven for years. In less than an hour, though, breakfast was an accomplished fact, and Mr. Devine, now soothed by one of his black cigars, set out for a more extended tour of the grounds. He discovered the path leading to the Sound, and had spent some time on the porch of the boat-house, watching the steamers and coasting vessels crawl past, when Timmins came down, evidently in search of him.

"Maybe I didn't mention last night, sir," began Timmins suavely, "anything about the Hewingtons?"

"I guess you didn't, Timmins," said the "Cherub" encouragingly. "What about 'em? Didn't leave any messages for me, did they?"

"It's not just that, sir. The fact is, sir, they haven't gone."

"Eh! What's that? Haven't gone! Why, where are they?"

"Back at the house, sir."

"Oh! you don't say? Well, that's interesting."

"It's all on account of the old lady, sir, Mr. Hewington's sister, who was took so bad she couldn't be moved. Perhaps I should have spoken sooner, sir, but they didn't know how long you'd stop—maybe only a flying trip, as it might be—so—"

"Yes, I understand. What I didn't know wouldn't hurt me, eh? It's all right. There's Mr. Hewington and his sick sister, is there. That all?"

"And the Countess Vecchi, sir."

"The which?" Mr. Devine grabbed the cigar from between his teeth and turned quickly on Timmins.

"The Countess Vecchi, sir, as stayed to look after the aunt. The Countess is the married daughter, sir."

"Oh! Imported a count, did they? Is he knocking around the place, too?"

"The count's been dead two years, sir, and"—here Timmins coughed apologetically behind his hand—"the Hewingtons wa'n't precisely sorry to lose him."

"Not a howling success, eh?"

"Hardly, sir. The Countess left him two hours after the wedding."

"She must be a hummer," observed the "Cherub," and then, reflectively: "Countesses are hardly in my line. Guess you can hook up pretty soon and drive me back to the station. I don't want to disturb the old lady."

"Lord, sir, you won't see any of them! No sooner did they hear you were coming than they moved into the top floor of the east wing, and there they've shut themselves up like the house was quarantined. Besides, sir, there isn't another express you could get to the city until the ten-thirty-three to-night."

"Oh, well, there's plenty of time then.

Perhaps you'll be able to dig up some more reports before night."

Mr. Devine was thinking of the young person he had seen in the garden. It didn't matter who she was, of course, but it might be interesting to know.

IV

THE day passed, however, without further discoveries, although at any moment the "Cherub" was prepared to find himself confronted, either by Mr. Hewington, or the Countess, or the young woman of the roses, or some wholly unknown person. But he had the grounds, the verandas, and the great rooms all to himself.

"It's like playing hide and seek and being it all the time," was his comment. "And I've seen livelier games."

He had seated himself for another solitary and stately meal when a bell rang somewhere, and Eppings excused himself to answer it. Then ensued out in the reception hall a whispered conversation, part of which Mr. Devine could hardly avoid

hearing, although he was certain it was not intended for his ears.

"Is that—that dreadful man in there?" asked a voice.

"Wonder if that's me?" thought the "Cherub." He could not catch the butler's reply.

"Then I must go in," continued the voice. "But listen, Eppings; stay within call. Now you may tell him I am coming."

Eppings reappeared to announce impressively: "The Countess Vecchi, sir."

"Oh, the devil!" Mr. Devine grabbed his napkin end from between the second and third buttons of his waistcoat and dropped it across his left knee. Also he readjusted his necktie and sat up very straight in his chair. He had a vague notion that all countesses were large, stout women, who wore crowns of some sort, ermine-trimmed robes, and a multitude of rings. He had seen one once; an old,

wrinkled personage, with a disposition like a setting hen and a voice like a cross-cut saw.

"The Countess, eh? Well, what about her? Has she come after the soup?"

"She'd like to speak to you, sir. She's——"

Further explanation proved unnecessary, for through the doorway stepped the big-eyed, slender young person whom he had seen before breakfast in the garden. She wore neither crown nor ermine robes. The braid of dark hair had been transformed into a simple but effective setting for the long oval of her face. Simple was her gown, too, of some black, flimsy material which hung in graceful folds away from the square-cut neck, opening out of which rose her white, rounded throat. But the "Cherub" would have known those big eyes under any disguise.

"Hello! *You?*" he exclaimed. "Say,

honest, you aren't the Countess, are you?"

She bowed an admission of the fact, evidently much disconcerted by this greeting.

"Well, I'll be hanged!" continued Mr. Devine, gazing at her in frank amazement. "Why, I thought— Well, I'd never take you for a countess. Say, have a seat, won't you?"

But the Countess Vecchi had obviously come on a specific errand. Ignoring his surprise and his invitation, she walked resolutely to the opposite end of the table from Mr. Devine and, nervously clasping and unclasping her fingers as she spoke, began just as she had intended to begin.

"I—I hope Timmins has explained to you, Mr. Devine, our embarrassing situation here?"

Mr. Devine nodded.

"My father wishes me to say that the

serious condition of my aunt makes it impossible for us to leave the house at present. Just as soon as she improves we will go away."

"Oh, that's all right; stay as long as you like."

"But we don't want to stay at all. My father wishes you to understand that. It—it is very painful for him to accept a favour, even toleration, from you. He charged me not to apologize, however, as the circumstances are beyond our control. I am not apologizing, you see, only explaining." There was much earnestness in her words, and a pleading, half-frightened expression in her big, brown eyes.

"Oh, you're doing fine," said Mr. Devine, reassuringly. "Anything else the old gentleman wants me to understand?"

"No, I think that is all, except that during your stay," continued the Countess, "we shall keep to our rooms."

"Oh, you needn't do that," protested Mr. Devine.

"But it is my father's desire," added the Countess. "And we shall take all our meals there."

"Oh, come, that isn't necessary. You tell your father to make himself at home here until he's ready to go. I won't bite him, or you either. Just you sit down here and have some dinner, and send up for the old gentleman."

"No, I couldn't think of doing such a thing. Papa would never allow it."

"Looks as if I didn't stand very well with your father," commented Mr. Devine. "Is there anything special?"

"He thinks that you are rather—that is, that you—you—" A sudden rush of colour came into the olive-shaded cheeks of the Countess, and her brown eyes began to study the rug pattern. Mr. Devine sud-

denly decided that sometimes countesses were nice to look at.

"Yes," he said, encouragingly, "rather what?"

"Well, rather wild and wicked and reckless, you know. He was afraid that you might become—er—intoxicated."

A cherubic expression spread over the pink - and - white face of Mr. Devine. "Thinks I'm a sort of a cross between a cowboy and a pirate, eh? Seems to know all about me, too!"

"He has read about you in the newspapers," ventured the Countess, with a shy, half-curious glance, which for an instant met the calm, level gaze of Mr. Devine's blue eyes.

"Oh!" The "Cherub" spoke as one who has seen a light. "Something about how I spent half a million in Paris one week—or was it a million?"

"Half a million, the paper said. But

you won it all back at Monte Carlo the next week, didn't you? We read about the big poker game, too; the one that started in Liverpool and ended off Sandy Hook."

"That *was* a coker!"

"And the champagne supper you gave to forty chorus girls."

"Yes, I believe there were forty. You have certainly kept well posted."

The Countess Vecchi hesitated a moment before making a response. She cast an inquiring glance at Mr. Devine.

"I—I suppose that I should explain," she began. "Papa, you see, is interested in sociology."

"Sort of an anarchist, eh?" suggested the "Cherub."

"Oh, no, no! Not socialism, but sociology, the study of social conditions and all that. He reads books about it and gathers statistics. He is writing a pamphlet on the subject."

Mr. Devine nodded uncomprehendingly.

"He has been particularly interested in—in your career. In fact, he has made quite a study of it. He gets everything that is printed about you from a newspaper-clipping bureau, and he has the pieces pasted in a big scrap-book."

"In a book, eh?"

"There are such a lot of them, it's the only way."

"Must make lively reading."

"Oh, it does. Papa says that you are a typical product of the present commercial age."

"Well, that's nice of him; I've been called worse names."

"Of course"—here the Countess nerved herself to look sternly at the smiling Mr. Devine—"he disapproves very strongly of you. He says it isn't simply that you spend so much money foolishly, but that you set such a bad example to other young

men who cannot afford, perhaps, to follow it."

"Yes, that's a good point," assented Mr. Devine, judicially.

"Then you are not ashamed? You do not deny?" The brown eyes of the Countess opened very wide.

"Well, I'm not exactly proud of some things I've done, but I'm not ashamed, either, and I never deny anything; it would keep me too busy."

"Of course, I know that the newspapers often exaggerate," admitted the Countess. "Perhaps they have about you."

"Think so? Why?"

The Countess Vecchi paused long enough to look across the table at the clear-skinned, chubby face of Mr. Devine.

"Well, you don't look at all as I had expected."

"Horns and hoofs not in evidence?" chuckled the "Cherub."

" You know what I mean," protested the Countess. " One can usually recognize the marks of—of dissipation."

" Oh, you can't always tell by the looks," which remark Mr. Devine accompanied by a whimsical puckering of the lips, a manœuvre that did not escape the Countess.

" No, you cannot," she said, decidedly; " and papa is quite certain that you are an improper person."

" Too wicked for you to eat dinner with, am I?"

" Papa thinks so."

" And he has read the newspapers, eh? All right. But it's dull business, eating alone."

" I couldn't make up for the absence of forty chorus girls." She delivered this parting shot over her shoulder.

" I'm not so sure about that," replied the " Cherub." " You tell your father, won't you, that the dreadful man is not yet intoxicated."

The Countess paused at the door. "I shall tell him something of the kind, certainly."

"And then you'll barricade yourselves in your rooms. Well, good-night and pleasant dreams." The "Cherub" waved a solemn farewell with his napkin as the Countess disappeared toward the stairs.

But Mr. Devine had not seen the last of the Countess for that night. In a moment she came back.

"I—I hope I did not say too much," she began, glancing timidly at him. "You are not offended, are you?"

Mr. Devine smiled reassuringly. "Do I look very savage?"

"I was afraid, you know, that on thinking it over, about the clippings and so on, you might be angry. If you should meet my father you wouldn't say anything about it, would you?"

There was a look in her eyes which some-

how made the "Cherub" feel as if he had been shaking a club at her.

"Not a word from me. Why, I would act as if we were the best of friends."

"Oh, you mustn't do that, either! Papa would not like that. He doesn't even know that I am talking to you now. He told me to have Eppings give you his message, but I thought that I could explain things better if I came myself."

"You're right; Eppings would have made a mess of it."

"But papa mustn't know. He is so stern, you see, and he thinks that you are so—well, so——"

"Yes, I see. I've got a fair working plan of the way he has me sized up. I'm used to that sort of thing, though. It don't bother me a bit."

"Oh!" The eyes of the Countess widened a trifle. "I'm glad you feel that way. It makes it easier for me to say

something about which I hesitated. You see, I have been almost as deeply interested in following your career as my father has."

"Have you? That's nice."

"But not in the same way. Papa, you know, is merely shocked and indignant at the wild things you do. He thinks that you should be restrained or punished, but I tell him that perhaps it is all owing to the influences which surround you, your companions, you know, and the men you meet in business. They are not very nice men, are they?"

"Most of them manage to keep out of jail."

"Yes, of course; but tell me, are they men of refinement and good morals? Don't they drink heavily and gamble and—and do other things which they shouldn't?"

"Well, there are a good many high rollers in our bunch."

"And they lead you on to do as they do, don't they? And there isn't any one to tell you that you are worthy of better things? I knew it! But if you could be brought into contact with a different class, if you could mingle with persons in the higher grades of society, I am sure you would wish to live differently."

"Think I ought to go in for society, do you?" The "Cherub's" beaming face presented a picture of complacent interest.

"Well, in a way. Of course, you would find it difficult to step at once into the best society, but you could make a beginning."

"I could work up, eh?"

"It would be slow; there is so much reserve about our best families. In fact, there are certain circles which you would probably find it impossible to enter."

"Couldn't break in with an axe, I suppose?"

The Countess smiled. "You have such

an odd way of putting things. It wouldn't be necessary for you to enter the most exclusive sets, but there are plenty of nice people that you could meet; that is, if you wanted to change your associates."

" You think it would be a good scheme, do you? "

" Oh, splendid! You'll not mind my speaking to you about it, will you? You see, I have wanted for a long time to do something of the kind for some one. Our bishop has urged me to go into home missionary work. I have tried, but the villagers here are so unresponsive that I haven't had much success."

" Well, you can try any kind of reform on me that you like."

" Oh, the bishop will be delighted when I tell him! He rather expected, you know, that I would work merely among the poor of this parish—folks who are not so much wicked as they are lazy and shiftless. I

never dreamed, of course, of having an opportunity for influencing any one so—well, such as yourself," and the Countess favoured him with a glance in which curiosity and pride of discovery were oddly mixed.

"It's what you might call a stroke of luck for both of us, isn't it?" queried the "Cherub." "Why, I've never had a show of reforming before, except once when I was held up by a Salvation Army girl, who wanted me to follow the band and be saved. But just how are you going to tackle the job?"

"I'm sure I don't know." Perplexity dwelt in the brown eyes for an instant. "I have had so little experience. But I want to do something while you are here. It is my idea, you know, that personal influence and example count for a good deal. If I could only talk to you about your reckless habits——"

"Well, why not? There'll be all day tomorrow."

"But probably I shall not see you again. Papa doesn't expect me to."

"Oh, say, you're not going to stay shut up in your rooms all day, are you?"

"Except for a little walk in the garden right after breakfast."

"About nine o'clock, eh? I'll be there."

"No, no, you mustn't! That is, you mustn't plan to be there. Of course, if it should be purely by accident——"

"I'll see to that part of it, all right. You'll be in the garden, will you?"

The Countess hesitated. Then she half whispered, "Possibly," gave him an elusive glance, and fled as if to escape the results of her daring.

Whereupon Eppings, amazingly solemn of countenance, and moving as one who officiates at a sad and sacred rite, came in and began to serve the soup.

“Drippings, old boy—” began the “Cherub.”

“Beg pardon, sir; Eppings, sir.”

“Oh, yes; well, Eppings, this is a great world.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And it isn’t half so bad as it looks, Eppings.”

“I am glad to hear you say so, sir. A little Worcestershire, sir?”

V

As to the matter of raiment, Mr. "Cherub" Devine was fastidious in but one particular. He was fond of fancy waistcoats. Had the other details of his wardrobe been planned in like proportions, it would have been as bulky as that of a Chinese mandarin.

But his fastidiousness began and ended with waistcoats. His trousers and coats were invariably of the same cloth and cut, summer and winter, year in and year out. His waistcoats betrayed a catholic taste for colour and variety. He ordered new ones whenever he could spare time for the serious business of selecting a new pattern. Whenever he felt like indulging himself, or celebrating a victory, or forgetting a defeat, he went out and bought a new waistcoat.

As he was "travelling light," he had brought to Hewington Acres a bare half dozen of them, and of these he had narrowed the choice to two: one a creation of tobacco-brown silk, with red dots in it, the other a white piqué with buttons of smoked pearl. Which should he wear for a Sunday morning stroll in the garden? In the end he tossed a quarter. The brown silk won, much to his satisfaction, for he had a new-born suspicion that the white one made his waist line appear more rotund than it really was.

Not that Mr. Devine often displayed such vanity. He was a little puzzled himself over this whim. Rather indefinitely he connected it with the Countess Vecchi. Yet when he thought of her he laughed.

Still, he was in the garden at nine o'clock. Probably it was mere curiosity that led the "Cherub" to pace up and down the grimy kept walks for a long half hour. He trav-

about to give up the vigil and leave, when he caught sight of the Countess peering from behind one of the stone gate posts. She dodged out of sight at first glimpse of him, but a moment later she reappeared.

Making a pretence of not having seen her, Mr. Devine sauntered up to the gate, and seemed surprised when he found her before him. He noted that this morning she was in grey, with something white at her throat. He even remembered that last night she had worn black. His "good-morning" was intended to carry out the idea of a purely accidental meeting, but it met with no similar response.

"You must not misunderstand my coming here," she began, hurriedly. "It was very wrong of me to think of such a thing. I came only to tell you so."

"Anything new about me in the Sunday papers?"

"No, but papa was talking about you again last night, and he——"

"Oh, that's the trouble! He got out his scrapbook. Which chapter of my many wickednesses furnished the text this time?"

"He read to me about that French singer."

"La Belle Savoy?"

"Yes, the one to whom you gave the diamond tiara which was stolen."

"Oh, yes. That was Kittie's birthday present. Nice little thing, Kittie. Her real name is O'Neill, you know."

"Why, the clipping said she was a famous Parisian *chanteuse!*"

"Shouldn't be surprised; those press agents are great on fancy names. But Kittie's a Chicago girl, just the same. Her mother used to run a boarding-house there. I know, because Mrs. O'Neill took care of me for three weeks once, when I was sick and hadn't a dollar."

"Oh!" said the Countess Vecchi, beginning to retreat. "It—it is very interesting."

"But doesn't make good, eh? Well, that's the best I can do. What! you're not going?"

The Countess was retreating up the path, but she still kept her brown eyes fixed on Mr. Devine. There was a curious, apprehensive look in them, such as a small boy bestows on a cannon cracker to which he has touched a match.

"Yes, I ought to go directly back."

"But how about the reform? I thought we were to have a talk, and that you were going to give me some pointers on breaking into good society. You're not going to quit like this, are you?"

The Countess shook her head.

"I was mistaken. It was very silly of me to make such a promise. But I—I—Oh, can't you see? I ought not to be here talking to you at all."

"Well, why not? What's the particular matter with me, anyway? Say, do you know, you've got me real interested on that point. Of course, I'm no howling swell, or anything of that kind; but I'm no jail bird, either. Just what is it that's wrong?"

Evidently he was much in earnest, and when the "Cherub" got himself into that frame of mind there was no mistaking it. While the lips still smiled, the blue eyes took on a look of soberness that was very real.

"Oh, I couldn't, I couldn't tell you." The Countess threw him a half-scared look, as if she wished she had not gone so far.

"Then it is something worse than I thought."

"No, it isn't either. It's only—only that—" The Countess glanced about in desperation. "Well, I will ask you: Do you consider yourself a—a gentleman?"

For a moment Mr. Devine stared at her speechless. He had insisted on knowing,

and now that he had her answer, he was too much astonished to frame a reply. He had expected nothing of this kind. The question opened up before him a wholly unexplored field. In all his career he had never before been confronted with such a query. He had lived in a world where the main test of fitness was quite different. Are you successful? That was what his world had asked him, over and over again. It was the query put to all whom he knew. It was the last and final appraisement. If you could answer that to the world's satisfaction, it was enough. Nothing else counted. And Mr. Devine, when it was put to him, could afford to grin.

But here was something new. Did he consider himself a gentleman? Oh, he knew the word well enough; understood that, to a certain class of persons, it had an importance—persons who had not reached the point where they could ignore

it; but that it held any significance for him, this was a novel suggestion. Why, he had never stopped to think whether it did or not, and, now that he had stopped, he was inclined, after the first shock of surprise had subsided, to treat the matter as an absurdity. The flickering light returned to his eyes.

"Now that you mention it," he said, "I don't remember that I have ever been accused of being a perfect gentleman. But what is a gentleman? What's your idea of one?"

"Why—why—" The Countess Vecchi hesitated. Often as she had made the distinction between men who were gentlemen and those whom she had decided were not, she had never before been called upon for an exact definition of the term. And how should she convey, to one who did not even claim those subtle attributes, just what she meant? But she must make the

attempt. "Why, a gentleman is a man of honour; one who has regard for the rights and feelings and sensibilities of others."

"What about his bank account? Doesn't that cut any ice?"

"No," said the Countess slowly, a hint of regret in her tone. "A gentleman may be poor."

"Yes, I guess that's so," assented the "Cherub." "But he ought to belong to a club or two, even if he's posted for dues; and go to church regular, and know who his great-grandfather was, and move around in the swell push, and be able to throw in the broad a's and the final g's where they belong, eh? That's the way you judge 'em, isn't it?"

The Countess smiled indulgently.

"Some do. I do not. For instance, my father is no longer wealthy, he does not attend church, he shuns social life—but he

is honourable, he is thoughtful of others, so he is a gentleman."

"And I'm not, eh?"

She had not anticipated this blunt application, had almost forgotten, in her eagerness to prove her case, the personal equation that was involved; and it came home to her harshly.

"Oh, no, no! I did not mean to say that. I couldn't say it. I—I do not know you well enough. I merely asked you to decide for yourself."

"But you had me all weighed up, didn't you, from the first? Hadn't you decided that I didn't come up to specifications?"

The Countess bit her lip from vexation. She was cornered, and knew it. But was she beaten? Did you ever see a woman defeated by mere logic?

"That's unfair," she replied reproachfully. "You know I haven't said anything of the kind. All I did say was that I ought to go back, and I must."

"And not come near me again?"

"Probably not."

"Then I suppose I'll just have to keep right on going to the dogs," observed the "Cherub" dolefully. "I didn't know I was quite such a hopeless case, though."

"Oh, it isn't that, it isn't that!" protested the Countess.

"Must be," declared the "Cherub." "If it wasn't you wouldn't run away like this. Why, I'm so bad that you won't talk to me. I don't suppose that you'd even shake hands with any one so wicked."

The Countess made a gesture of dissent.

"But you know you wouldn't," he insisted.

It may have been merely impulse, perhaps it was the pathetic spectacle of the "Cherub's" injured feelings. Tears showed suddenly in the brown eyes of the Countess.

"Oh, you mustn't feel that way, you

mustn't!" she pleaded. "Of course I will. There!" Impulsively she extended both hands to him. Rather awkwardly Mr. Devine took them in his. Then he did not know what to do next, whether to let go or to hold on.

He had not fully decided when a tall, grey-haired man of stern face and dignified bearing appeared behind them. He seemed very much astonished at the scene.

"Adèle, who is this?" he demanded.

"This, father, is Mr. Devine." It was finely done. No hesitancy, no trembling of voice, no wavering of the eyes.

"Not the—the—" Mr. Hewington balked at pronouncing the familiar nickname.

"Yes, the 'Cherub.' Isn't it, Mr. Devine?"

Mr. Devine nodded a good-natured assent.

"But, Adèle, this is entirely unexpected.

I had no idea that you were acquainted with this—er—Mr. Devine."

"I have only been telling him that I should not see him again during his stay."

"Ah! Quite proper. I am sure that Mr. Devine does not expect it. Good-day, sir. Come, Adèle."

Dutifully the Countess followed her father out of the garden. Watching them disappear in the direction of the big house, Mr. Devine thoughtfully clipped the end from a fat, black cigar. Seating himself on a vine-shaded bench, the "Cherub" proceeded to puff little blue rings up toward the unheeding leaves.

VI

THE ash on Mr. Devine's cigar, however, was not an eighth of an inch longer before he was surprised to see Mr. Hewington reappear before him. The Hewingtons, it seemed, were addicted to postscripts.

"Wonder if he's come back with a stick," reflected the "Cherub."

But Mr. Hewington's manner was not openly hostile.

"It has just occurred to me, Mr. Devine," he began, "that you might fancy our attitude somewhat discourteous. If so, you are in error. We are merely maintaining, under rather awkward conditions, our customary reserve. Do you follow me, sir?"

"I get a glimmer now and then," com-

placently rejoined the "Cherub." "You mean that you're not mixers."

Mr. Hewington smiled coldly at the metaphor. "Society is apt to make distinctions," he continued. "Perhaps you do not know that our family has been prominent since Colonial times. My great aunt married a son of the Marquis de Lafayette."

"Never met the gentleman," commented the "Cherub."

"Probably not. He came to America in 1815."

"So? Then he got here before I did."

Mr. Hewington ignored this remark. "This estate, Mr. Devine, was part of the original grant. In my father's time it extended for fifteen miles along the ~~Sound~~. The old mansion, which stood for nearly a century, was honoured by the presence of such statesmen as Daniel Webster, President Tyler and others, so Charles Dickens ~~wrote~~ ^{was writing}

guest here during his tour of this country. In the present house the late Mrs. Hewington and myself have welcomed many distinguished personages. Then, as you know, my daughter is the Countess Vecchi, allied by marriage to one of the noblest families of Lombardy."

"Seems to me I heard something about that."

"Possibly, possibly." Mr. Hewington waved his eyeglasses impatiently. "I am telling you these things, Mr. Devine, that you may have a better understanding of our attitude. I might also add that my daughter is of a very nervous and excitable temperament. Since the death of the Count she has lived in seclusion. She has almost entirely withdrawn from society. She has a positive dread of strangers."

Mr. Devine looked keenly at the old gentleman. "I see," he observed. "Kind

of flocks by herself. Well, I've no objection. I didn't come up here especially to get acquainted with you folks, you know. In fact, you and the Countess were rather sprung on me as a surprise."

Mr. Hewington might have been seen to shudder. "My dear Mr. Devine," he protested, "I fear that you still fail to realize our position. Circumstances compel us to remain here during your stay. There is my sister——"

"Yes, I know all about that, and I wouldn't for the world disturb the sick lady. I'm just trying to be sociable. I want you to stay until you're ready to leave."

"Ah, that is the very thing I wish to speak about. You see, it is quite uncertain when we shall leave or where we shall go. I had thought of going abroad"—here Mr. Hewington waved his glasses as if to indicate that anywhere in Europe,

Asia or Africa might become his destination—"but there is the matter of expense. It is very annoying to be forced to consider such details, Mr. Devine, very annoying."

"It's all of that," assented Mr. Devine.

"Besides," resumed Mr. Hewington, "there would be the cost of maintaining abroad an establishment such as this. Really, I don't see how I could manage it. Sometimes I think that I should give more attention to my business affairs. I find it embarrassing to be without funds. I have written several letters to my attorneys, urging them to forward a check at once. But they send nothing but excuses. They talk about mortgages and foreclosures and overdrawn accounts. Just as though I could tell them what to do! So you see, Mr. Devine, that my plans for the immediate future are very uncertain."

"Yes, that seems to be the word. What does the Countess say about it?"

"I never discuss matters of business with my daughter. Women do not understand such matters. Of course, it is necessary to have her sign papers now and then. The lawyers insist on it, some of the property having been left to her, but I never try to explain things which I do not fully comprehend myself. The sale of this place, for instance, still perplexes me. I did not desire it at all. I suppose, however, that it was necessary, as a matter of form. Probably you have a clearer notion of it than I, Mr. Devine."

"Your idea is a bit hazy," admitted the "Cherub."

"Perhaps so, but I presume that your—er—possession here is only a temporary arrangement. Matters will soon be adjusted, I suppose, when my attorneys finally get around to it. My daughter was

more or less worried until I assured her that I would attend to the affair personally."

"Then she cheered up, did she?" Mr. Devine appeared to find the conversation entertaining.

"She was relieved, of course. But I have been so engrossed in preparing a pamphlet on—well, on a scientific subject, which would not be of interest to you—that I have neglected to take the proper steps. However, now that you thoroughly understand the situation, I trust that you will not act hastily."

"Oh, I shan't put you out, or anything like that, Mr. Hewington. Make your mind easy on that score."

"It is very considerate of you, sir. Of course, until the affair is settled, we shall not encroach on your technical right of possession more than is absolutely necessary. If the present arrangement is satis-

factory, I would suggest that it be continued."

The "Cherub" favoured Mr. Hewington with a whimsical smile. "Well, we'll let the thing drift for a while, anyway. Only, you don't have to act as though you were prisoners. Why don't you and the Countess come down to your meals, just as though I wasn't here?"

"My dear sir—" Here Mr. Hewington began an exhaustive review of the situation. When he was through, Mr. Devine chuckled gleefully. It was an amazingly simple proposition. He, the "Cherub," being a necessary evil, was to be endured as gracefully as possible, in much the same way as a merchant endures the presence of a deputy sheriff installed in his store during bankruptcy proceedings. As for any other recognition, that was out of the question. The Hewingtons were the Hewingtons, and he—well, he was "Cherub" De-

vine. That told the story. He was to know that the Countess viewed him as something between a marauding burglar and an officious policeman.

It was all done very courteously and delicately, in Mr. Hewington's fine, aristocratic manner, yet nothing but the superlative buoyancy of Mr. Devine's audacious soul saved him from being utterly crushed.

"I wish I could have dreams like that," soliloquized the "Cherub," when he had been left alone.

Yet upon reviewing the situation carefully, he decided that the realities could be sufficiently entertaining if looked at in the right way.

He had anticipated rather a dull and uneventful time of it when he had started for Hewington Acres. He had thought, however, that two days absolutely free from mental effort of any kind would be good for him. But the possibilities incident upon

acquiring a quiet country house were surprising.

"Let's see," he reflected, "I'm not exactly what you'd call an unwelcome guest, am I? I guess I must be an unwelcome host, then; and hanged if that isn't a new one on me. But there's worse and more of it. I'm no gentleman, for one item. Then, if I'm to believe all I hear about myself, I'm a deep-dyed villain and an unregenerate sinner who has butted into his own house. Take it all around, things are pretty badly mixed. Wonder what programme I ought to follow?"

You will agree that the situation was just a little confusing. The "Cherub" was glad of a chance to think it over.

His first impulse was to take the next train back to the city and shift to his lawyers the whole responsibility of dealing with the Hewingtons. But, on second thought, he decided that this would not do at all.

He knew what course his lawyers would take. They would neither smile at the pompous absurdities of old Mr. Hewington nor be moved by the pathetic trustfulness of the little Countess. They would care nothing for appealing glances from brown eyes. The eyes might be filled with tears. No, he must attend to this business himself.

To be sure, he might simply go away and leave them at Hewington Acres indefinitely, but he felt that this would be shirking, and the "Cherub's" way was to face a proposition squarely. Besides, he did not quite relish the rôle of social outcast which the Hewingtons seemed to think he was filling. While he believed himself to be wholly without pride in such matters, the fact remained that Mr. Devine was far from being humble. To be classed as an inferior, to be regarded condescendingly, even by such an impractical person as Mr.

Hewington, hurt a little. As for the Countess, she ought to have a chance to find out that he wasn't such a bogie man as she fancied him.

More or less thought did Mr. Devine bestow upon the Countess Vecchi during the next half hour. He had a well-defined idea, had the "Cherub," that his knowledge of women was vast and deep. Oh, he had seen lots of them! They had been of all kinds, too. It was part of his philosophy that the wise man kept out of their way, that generally they meant mischief, and that when they didn't they were most dangerous.

So, in spite of what he regarded as many allurements, he had held himself aloof. He lived at a bachelor hotel, frequented clubs where the swish of skirts was never heard, and even banished girl stenographers from his offices. The only risk he ran of being entrapped in feminine snares was at

the dairy lunch, where the neatly gowned, rosy-cheeked waitresses smiled vainly at him across the counter.

"No, thank you." This was the "Cherub's" attitude toward the sex. One experience was quite enough for him. For there had been more to that affair with Kittie O'Neill than he had told the Countess. He was hardly out of his teens then, to be sure, and Kittie, having achieved one-and-twenty and a position in the second row of the chorus, had viewed his awkward advances with silent scorn, until one eventful day when she had fully revealed her attitude by a sudden burst of derisive laughter. Kittie had lived to regret that ill-timed disclosure, for she had seen her mother's charity boarder develop into a man of millions. "Cherub" Devine's faith in womankind had been destroyed, however, and the women who had later tried to restore it had signally failed. Per-

haps they had not been especially well-fitted for the task.

But in the presence of the Countess Vecchi he forgot all his suspicions. It was as if he had discovered a new species, a much finer, rarer, more delicate and, in every way, more delectable species. He was quite sure that no one just like her had ever existed before.

Therefore it was amazingly unjust that she should look upon him as an outcast or as a burning brand of sin. But what was he to do about it? He couldn't tell her what a good fellow he was, and she had no chance of finding it out for herself so long as the old gentleman regarded him as socially unfit. This last thought rankled deep.

"I see," exclaimed the "Cherub" at last. "I've got to qualify in his class. Well, here goes!"

VII

HAVING decided upon his course of action, Mr. Devine promptly sought out the obsequious Timmins at his office in the stables.

"Been here some time, haven't you, Timmins?" he suggested.

"Came here as under-groom fifteen years ago, sir."

"Must know the old gentleman fairly well, then?"

"Mr. Hewington, sir?"

"The same."

"Lor', yes, sir. I know him as well as I know myself. And he's a very fine old gentleman, sir, in his way."

"Sure," assented the "Cherub." He had settled back in an office chair and was

studying intently the varnished pine ceiling. "But what's his way?" he asked, abruptly.

Timmins looked perplexed.

"Where are his short ribs?" went on Mr. Devine. "What's his strong suit?"

"Oh!" Timmins had translated Mr. Devine's figures of speech. "Well, sir, he's all wrapped up in the Countess Vecchi, sir, him being a widower for so long. Nearly knocked him out when the Count turned out to be so bad."

"What ailed the Count, anyway?"

"Oh, he was regular wicked, sir; played roulette most of the time. It's an expensive fad, roulette is. Why, they hadn't more'n left the church before he asks the Countess for money, and chokes her when she wouldn't get it for him. Yes, sir, he was regular wicked."

"Who made that match, Timmins?"

"Mr. Hewington himself, sir. He was

carried away with the idea of his daughter being a countess."

"Banks heavy on society, does he? Do the Hewingtons cut much of a figure now in the giddy whirl?"

"Lor', no, sir. Since they lost their money they've kind of dropped out of it all. It goes hard with the old gentleman, too, sir."

Mr. Devine smoked thoughtfully for several moments before asking: "Any real swell neighbors around here?"

"Lots of 'em, sir. It's a very select neighborhood, sir, as you'll find. Why, just above us are the Wilburs, Knickerbockers, sir. Above them are the Miller-Tremways — youngest daughter married into the Earl of Dippington's family, and was received at court. And next below us are the Walloways, folks that has their own coat-of-arms, and——"

"Not Nick Walloway?"

"He's the head of the family now, sir, Nicholas is."

"So Nick is a neighbour of mine, is he?"

"But they're very exclusive, the Walloways are, sir. They entertain lots of titled folks. They used to be very friendly here, sir, but none of them's been here now for nearly two years."

"Then it's time they came," declared Mr. Devine. "How about the other folks, the Wilburs and the Tremways?"

"Haven't been here for a long time, either, sir."

"Very thoughtless of them, isn't it? But we'll fix that. Hitch up two or three of those gingersnap horses and take me over to the Walloway place."

"To-day, sir?" Timmins stared his astonishment.

"No, right away."

"But it's—it's Sunday, sir. Begging your pardon for being so bold, sir, but the

Walloways don't receive on Sundays, sir, and they've got a bishop there."

"Good! I'm right at home when there's a bishop around. And I'll see about the receiving business. You just attend to the hooking up, Timmins."

It was against all conventions, and Timmins foresaw a most frigid reception awaiting them at the exclusive Walloways.

"Don't you worry about that, Timmins. I can take care of all the icicles anybody wants to hand out. I'm used to that game. You just keep calm and hook up."

So Timmins did, but it was with much concern for his professional dignity that he drove up to the imposing carriage entrance of the Walloway residence. The reception opened quite as he had feared. In fact, the Walloway butler, who weighed twice as much as Eppings and was haughtier in proportion, was coldly doubtful as to whether or not Mr. Nicholas Walloway

could be seen. He surveyed the Hewington cobs with withering scorn, and glanced with disapproving eye at Mr. Devine's tobacco-brown waistcoat.

"I don't think Mr. Walloway is receiving to-day," he observed.

"Oh, that'll be all right, Fatty," cheerfully remarked Mr. Devine. "You trot along in and tell Nick that 'Cherub' Devine is out here."

The Walloway butler gasped. Timmins trembled in his seat. But the heavens did not fall, the earth did not yawn. Two minutes later Mr. Nicholas Walloway, much perplexed and not a little embarrassed, was escorting Mr. Devine past the awful presence of the stout butler and into the house.

A clean-cut young man of sedate, somewhat stiff bearing, and with sober grey eyes, was Mr. Nicholas Walloway. No one but the "Cherub," not even Mr. Wallo-

way's most intimate friends, ever dreamed of calling him Nick. In some way that familiar diminutive seemed inappropriate when applied to one who had the Walloway nose and the Walloway chin. But the "Cherub" appeared to take great satisfaction in thus addressing him.

Mr. Devine had never honoured young Mr. Walloway with a social call before, but he had dropped in once or twice at the new offices of Walloway & Co., and his reception had been extremely cordial. In fact, Mr. Nicholas Walloway had felt himself singularly favoured, and he said so. For his firm, in spite of the heavy mahogany desks and other expensive office trappings which seemed to proclaim a prosperous stability, was woefully lacking in just such customers as Mr. Devine could be if he chose. To have the handling of some of the "Cherub's" extensive business would establish the firm on a basis

where mahogany furniture would be something more than an enterprising presumption.

The "Cherub" had liked Nick Walloway from the start. He had been pleased with the quiet energy of the young aristocrat who had pluckily turned his back on his idle friends and set about the work of rehabilitating the family fortunes. But as yet he had not trusted him with any orders.

Mr. Devine assumed that if Mr. Walloway was glad to see him in his office, he would feel the same about welcoming him to his home. That this was hardly a safe line of reasoning, any one who knew the Wallways at all would have known. Just a glance at the slight wrinkle between the grey eyes should have suggested that Mr. Walloway was somewhat perplexed and not a little ill at ease. But if the Cherub saw these indications he gave no hint. Mr.

Walloway murmured something about a stock deal.

"Deal?" responded the "Cherub" lightly. "No, I'm not anxious about any deal; at least, not to-day. But, by the way, I expect your firm will get some orders along about Tuesday. Sure thing! Yes, it is something about P. Z. & N. Heard about that, did you? Well, I'll need you Tuesday. I've had my eye on you for some time, and now that I'm a neighbour of yours— Yes, that's right. Got the next place above, Hewington Rods, or Acres, or something."

Young Mr. Walloway appeared greatly astonished to hear this. "Do you mean to say that you own Hewington Acres? That you have taken possession? When did you do it?"

"Oh, I bought it a couple of months ago, but I just ran up Friday night to look the place over. Say, it isn't a bad place, is it, Nick?"

"No, I shouldn't call it bad. Ten years ago there wasn't a finer place on the Sound. But what has become of the Hewingtons?"

"They're there yet, but they don't mingle much with me. They've gone into retreat since I arrived. I'm not in their class, it seems. Say, Nick, I wish you could have heard the Countess telling me what she thought of me, last night. You know the Countess, of course?"

Mr. Nicholas Wallaway looked a bit uncomfortable for a moment. "I used to know her very well, but I haven't seen her since she went abroad and married the Count."

"She's a good deal of a hummer, the Countess is," suggested the "Cherub." "Not one of your front-row Amazons, you know, but a real nice little lady. Plenty of ginger about her, too, I should imagine, if she was stirred up."

Another person than Nicholas Walloway might have been moved to smile at this lively estimate. Young Mr. Walloway did not smile. An almost imperceptible shudder, accompanied by an involuntary closing of the eyelids, was his first acknowledgment. It was with difficulty that he found any response to make.

"Then—then you have made the acquaintance of Ad—— of the Countess Vecchi?"

"Oh, sure! We've had a couple of cosy little chats together. I've had a talk with the old gentleman, too; and, say, between 'em, hearing what they both think of me, I've got my chin down on my breastbone and my tail curled between my legs, like a yellow dog that's been run over by a truck. Why, when they got through stating their opinions of me, I didn't know whether to pin a red rag on myself, or go jump off the dock. Oh, it was lovely the

way they passed out the back-handers."

The soberness in Mr. Walloway's grey eyes lightened a little. His brow cleared.

"You mean that they are unfriendly to you?"

"Well, that hardly does the case justice, but it'll pass. And that's what fetches me here this morning. You see, I've planned to stick it out there for another day or so. And say, Nick, as an act of charity, I want you to come around to-night and do a little gloom-breaking. Bring the folks with you, too."

The eyebrows of young Mr. Walloway arched themselves in unfeigned astonishment.

"You—you wish me to visit you at Hewington Acres—to-night?"

"Sure! Nothing formal, you know; just an offhand dropping in, same as you might on any of your friends around here."

Mr. Walloway stared at him with a fas-

cinated interest. The "Cherub" smiled blandly, confidently, in return.

"But we—we—there are guests, you know," weakly protested Mr. Walloway.

"Guests? Well, bring 'em along. I don't mind. The more the merrier."

Mr. Walloway hastened to mention that one was a bishop, and named him impressively.

Mr. Devine slapped his knee joyously.

"What, the funny little old chap with the white side whiskers and an equator like a Broadway cop? Is *he* down here? Say, Nick, that bishop is the real article, he is. *Know* him! Well, you ask him about coming over on the 'Lucania' with Cherub Devine. Tell him I left a special invitation for him, and see what he says."

Mr. Walloway tried to brush the desperation from his forehead.

"I will consult my mother. Thank you very much, Mr. Devine."

"Oh, that's all right. And say, Nick, while you're about it, just round up a few of the neighbours for me, will you? Those Wilburs, and hyphen Tremways, and any others you think will do. Bring a mob—the house is big enough."

Young Mr. Walloway gasped.

"But—but—" he began in expostulation.

"Oh, yes, you can, if you go at it right," broke in the "Cherub" encouragingly. "They've all heard of me, I'll bet. Tell 'em I'm a freak, a curiosity—anything—that'll fetch 'em fast enough. Any one staying at the Tremways? You don't say! Comes from Austria, doesn't he? Well, you tell the Tremways to bring the baron along. Why, the baron and I took the baths together at Baden Two-Times. The baron's all right, too. Oh, he'll remember me. Now you fix up a nice little crowd, and have 'em over there by about—say,

what's the proper caper for a Sunday night spread?—Ten? Half-past eight! Well, call it eight-thirty, then. But don't leave out any ladies. This is no stag, Nick; it's to be a real swell society affair, and you're master of ceremonies. Oh, you'll do. Yes, I'm going now. Got to shake the wrinkles out of my claw-hammer coat. And, say, I'm going to send your stout friend here"—indicating the ponderous butler—"a bottle of anti-fat. He needs it. So long, Nick."

If the Cherub had used ropes and straps he could not have left young Mr. Walloway more incapable of moving from the chair in which he was sitting. For a long period he stared vaguely into space without stirring. Once or twice his lips murmured a name. It sounded something like Adèle. Gradually, however, the Walloway chin resumed its usual firmness. A look of resignation crept into the grey

eyes. He rose stiffly, walked to the window and stared out.

"Perhaps—perhaps," he faltered, "he's right."

VIII

CONSTERNATION fell upon Eppings when it occurred to Mr. Devine, along about two o'clock, to inform him that guests were expected at supper.

"Beg pardon, sir, but it is impossible, sir. We are not prepared. There's only a small filet in the house, sir, and not a duck, not a single duck."

"Have squab, then."

"But, sir, we haven't——"

"Oh, don't go on telling me what you haven't got. Hash up anything. Make some sandwiches, if you can't do better. Only don't come to me with your troubles. I'm no *chef*. But I'm going to have some friends here to-night, and I shall expect you to feed them; that's what you're here for, isn't it?"

"Ye-e-e-es, sir. At what hour, sir?"

"Eight-thirty, sharp."

"And how—how many plates, sir?"

"I don't know; ten or fifteen or twenty.

Better make it twenty, and then you can discard."

"I'll do my best, sir."

"That's the way to talk, Eppings."

Having made these offhand preparations, Mr. Devine sat himself down on the veranda to contemplate the unfamiliar prospect of many trees, a sweep of intensely green lawn and a wonderfully blue afternoon sky. He was quite satisfied with himself. Had he been in the habit of grinning, he would have done so then. But Mr. Devine seldom indulged in a grin. When fortune smiled on him he merely accepted it as the usual order, and regarded the end of his cigar with thoughtful admiration. It was only when misfortune threatened that the "Cherub" laughed insolently in its face.

He allowed himself to reflect, however, that the Hewingtons would soon be discovering that he was not exactly a social outcast. He was lingering fondly over this thought when he heard a step on the veranda, and looked up to see before him the aristocratic figure of the Countess Vecchi's father. Mr. Hewington seemed somewhat agitated.

"You must pardon me, sir, for a seeming impertinence," he began, "but I have just learned by accident that you contemplate giving a party here to-night. Is it a fact?"

Mr. Devine nodded. "Just a few friends, a dozen or so."

"Ah! Friends of yours?" Mr. Hewington gave the words a significant emphasis. "Then would it not be—er—prudent—perhaps discreet is the better word—for my daughter to go elsewhere for the night; to the hotel in the village, perhaps?"

There was a twinkle in the "Cherub's"

blue eyes as he responded: "Afraid of a rough house, are you?"

"My daughter, sir, is not exactly accustomed to—er—the kind of persons who might——"

"Oh, I see. Well, suit yourself about it; suit yourself. But it isn't at all necessary. I shall try to keep them quiet. There are to be only a few neighbours, the Walloways and——"

"The Walloways!"

"Yes, and the Wilburs and the Miller-Tremways, and old Bishop Horton, and a stray baron or two."

"Bishop Horton! Is Bishop Horton coming? Coming here?"

The "Cherub" took occasion to view leisurely Mr. Hewington's astonishment.

"Why, yes. The bishop's a friend of mine. Know him, do you?"

"We were college classmates, Mr. Devine," said Mr. Hewington.

"That so! I never went to college with the bishop, but I've crossed the ocean with him twice, and once I held his hat while he made a speech."

"Extraordinary!" said Mr. Hewington.

"Think so? It may seem a little queer to you, but the bishop doesn't appear to look at it that way. Come down and meet him and the rest of the folks, won't you? We're to have a little supper about half-past eight. And, say, bring the Countess; that is, unless you're afraid of the crowd."

This last was a violation of a paragraph in the "Cherub's" own code of ethics, a paragraph which read: "When the other fellow's down and out, don't rub it in." But the words had escaped before he knew it. Fortunately, Mr. Hewington did not seem to notice the allusion, for he retired, repeating in an undertone: "The Wallow-ways! Bishop Horton! The Miller-Trem-ways!"

Mr. Devine complacently awaited the result of this diplomatic stroke. He had small doubt as to what that result would be. The effect of his announcement to Mr. Hewington was evident. Nor did he have any misgivings that Nick Walloway might fail to carry out his part of the programme.

And sure enough, early in the evening the big rooms of the great house began to echo with the lively chatter of many guests. There was the portly Mrs. Walloway, whose dinner dances are always such brilliant affairs; there were the haughty Wilburs, the hyphenated Tremways, and a half-dozen others, without whose names and pictures the Sunday supplements would be incomplete.

They were somewhat disposed to look curiously upon Mr. "Cherub" Devine at first, but when the bishop had patted him affectionately on the shoulder, and the

baron had effusively embraced him, the atmosphere thawed perceptibly.

The one person who was least at his ease was young Mr. Walloway. For a while he was stiffer than ever, and he had the air of one who expects something very embarrassing to happen. The "Cherub" noted him casting restless, apprehensive glances about the rooms, as if watching for the entrance of some one who had not yet appeared. Also he saw that when Mrs. Walloway's eyes met those of her son there was an exchange of looks whose significance Mr. Devine could not read.

But the "Cherub" was undisturbed. Thus far he had gained his point. Whether Nick Walloway had been influenced by that suggestion of future business, or whether he had acted purely from motives of good fellowship, he cared not. The thing had been done. The programme which the "Cherub" had so hastily outlined that

morning was being carried out. Moreover, his guests appeared to be enjoying the novelty.

In the course of half an hour even Nick Walloway seemed to have become reassured that nothing untoward was about to happen. He unbent so far as to slap the "Cherub" on the shoulder and voice his congratulations. As a matter of fact, Mr. Devine, for one who had never before played the host, was acquitting himself creditably.

"Isn't he unique? So charmingly naïve!" whispered Mrs. Miller-Tremway.

"Perfectly delightful!" assented Mrs. Wilbur. "He says such odd things."

"So glad you're to be a neighbour of ours," the latter assured Mr. Devine. "And how do you like Hewington Acres?"

"Oh, it's a good deal like living in Central Park," observed the "Cherub"; "grass looks as if it had had a shave, a

hair-cut and a shampoo, you know. All the place lacks are some benches and nurses and baby carriages. I may have to bring those up here until I get used to it."

"Just fancy!" gurgled Mrs. Wilbur. "Then you have not had a country place before?"

"Me! Why, I never owned a foot of ground before in my life. All I've ever had has been trunks."

"But now that he's begun buying real estate," put in Nick Walloway, "there's no telling where he will stop. I shouldn't be surprised if he owned a whole State by New Year."

"Is it true, Mr. Devine," demanded Mrs. Walloway, "that you started on your financial career with only a few thousand dollars?"

"Few thousand!" echoed the "Cherub." "Why, I've seen the time when it would

have made me dizzy just to think of having a whole thousand."

"Do tell us about it, Mr. Devine," urged Mrs. Wilbur, adjusting her lorgnette.

"Go ahead, Cherub, I want to hear that yarn, too," seconded Nick Walloway. "That was before you came East, wasn't it?"

"Yes, that was in Chicago," said the "Cherub." "I began as office boy and drew down the princely salary of three dollars a week."

"And you lived on that!" Mrs. Wilbur peered at him curiously.

"Yes, and saved two of it every week for ten months."

"To send to a widowed mother?" suggested Mrs. Miller-Tremway.

"Not quite. I didn't have any widowed mother or any one else to look after. I was saving to go into business for myself. There was a pie and coffee stand around

the corner from our office, and I had my eye on that. I thought it would be a fine thing to sell pie and coffee and be my own boss. So I got the fellow's price for the outfit. He wanted seventy-five dollars, and it seemed to me as though he'd asked for enough to pay off the national debt.

"I had apartments in the sub-cellar of an office building that winter, and I paid my rent by shovelling ashes every morning. There wasn't any ruddy duck on my bill of fare those days. For luncheon I used to go out and look at the pie stand and draw in a long breath. But I saved the seventy-five and a few dollars more for a sinking fund.

"Then I resigned. I rather expected the firm to go under when they got that blow. They didn't, though. The junior member looked as if he had heard good news from home when I broke it to him, but all he said was: 'Say, hang this up as

you go out,' and he handed me one of those 'Boy Wanted' signs.

"That wasn't all that was coming to me that day, either. When I went around to the pie and coffee man with my seventy-five, he laughed and told me to brush by. His sales had jumped ten pies a day, and he had put his price up to an even hundred. For about five minutes things looked to me as the wash does when they get too much blueing in the tub. Then I braced up and squandered fifty cents on the first real feed I'd had for a year.

"After that it was sunrise again. I drifted into a place where they were selling dollar options on July wheat, and the first thing I knew I was plunging like a porpoise. Inside of two hours I had almost three hundred dollars in my pocket, and I knew how a Rothschild feels. I went back to the stand, shook my roll at the pie butcher, and did a lot of other fool

things, all meant to show the folks that I was it.

"Next day I hunted up a regular broker and began to speculate, nice and proper, on margins. I hadn't been at that more than a week before I hit the market right—and I've been hitting it ever since—except when it's hit me. Oh, yes, it hits back now and then, just to show me——"

And then Mr. Devine's eyes caught sight of a solemn face in a farther corner of the room. He ended his story abruptly.

"What's that, Eppings? Did you say supper? Good! Come on, folks; let's see what the cook has found in the ice box."

Probably the Wilburs and the Miller-Tremways had never been summoned to dine in just that fashion before. Perhaps the novelty pleased them, for they were in high good humour. They told each other that Mr. Devine was delightfully original. But two of them, Nick Walloway and

the bishop, knew that it was only the "Cherub's" amazing audacity which had prompted such speeches.

For Mr. Devine was in his most audacious mood. He had been talking for the purpose of delaying the supper announcement, in the hope that Mr. Hewington and the Countess would appear. But in vain he watched the door. With a cherubic smile, he saw his carefully laid plan go to smash.

In spite of Eppings' fears, it was a very good supper, but Mr. Devine took no note of it. He was thinking about the Countess. Yet apparently he was at his best. Mrs. Miller-Tremway even forgot that her son-in-law was the brother of an earl, and laughed as she used to laugh before the Tremway mines began to pay the dividends which had inspired the hyphen.

It was toward the close of the affair that the bishop took Mr. Devine one side and

asked: "Do you know what has become of the Hewingtons?"

"Sure," said the "Cherub." "They're all upstairs in retreat."

"In retreat! What do you mean, Devine?"

"It's because of me, you know. They don't approve of me. Mr. Hewington's writing a book about my wicked ways; gets his material from the newspapers. It'll be a thick book, I guess."

"Now, if that isn't just like De Courtney!" exclaimed the bishop. "Splendid fellow, though, in his way."

"So I've heard."

"If you don't mind, Devine, I'll run up and see him for a few minutes before I go."

"Oh, help yourself. They're somewhere on the top floor behind a barricade."

"I'll bring him out of that," said the bishop. But he had not reckoned on the full strength of Mr. Hewington's prejudice.

"It's not on my account, my dear bishop," said Mr. Hewington, "but I must guard my daughter from such association."

"Nonsense, De Courcey! Devine lacks polish, perhaps, but at heart he is an honest chap. Come down and meet him and bring Adèle."

"No, no, I couldn't think of it," firmly responded Mr. Hewington. "We shall remain here until he goes away." So the bishop went back alone.

When it was over, when the last of them had gone, Mr. "Cherub" Devine, groping about for some fitting term to express the situation, remarked enigmatically:

"That's what I call playing a four flush against a full house. Guess I'll take another stack, though."

Which meant that the audacious soul of Mr. Devine was humbled but not crushed.

He had tried to demonstrate to Mr. Hewington that his estimate of "Cherub"

Devine as one of the socially unfit was a mistaken judgment. But evidently he had demonstrated nothing of the kind. The Hewingtons had given him no chance to show what he could do in that line. Well, should he quit, then? Mr. Devine allowed himself to smile grimly. Almost any one in Wall Street could have told you what that meant.

IX

AMONG other urban habits which Mr. Devine had long since acquired was that of keeping late hours. When in town his usual programme was to spend the first part of the evening at the theatre. About midnight he had luncheon in some ornate hotel dining hall or club grill room, and after that he would play billiards as long as any one else would stay to play with him. If he happened to be without companions, he would sit around a hotel office or smoking-room, silently watching the folks who came and went, appearing to be just as well entertained as if he was with a dozen friends.

The big rooms at Hewington Acres were empty and very still long before midnight, but the "Cherub" continued to sit in the

library, smoking and meditating. He had a trick, when watching an unsteady market, of tearing pieces of paper into small bits and throwing them away. He was doing this now, and the Eastern rug under his feet looked as if it had been visited by a stage snow-storm, while an unlucky volume of Emerson's Essays had lost a half-dozen pages from the very middle of the book.

The net result of this reverie was that once more Mr. Devine had rejected the possibility of a retreat to the city. Right in the midst of it he was aroused by an odd noise. It sounded as if some one was dragging a heavy object down the stairs.

Looking out through the door hangings he could see the lower half of the staircase. For a moment he waited, and then there appeared the Countess Vecchi, tugging at a dress-suit case which was evidently well filled. She was dressed as if for the street, with a light silk dust-coat over her black

gown and a jaunty straw hat on her head. When she saw the "Cherub" she seemed startled and shrank back guiltily.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "I—I did not expect to find you here."

"I could guess that much," said the "Cherub," and added cheerfully, with a glance at the suit case which she had tried to swing behind her, "travelling?"

"I am going away."

"Are you? Do you generally start alone and in the middle of the night?" The "Cherub" had walked out into the hall and was looking curiously at her.

"I—I don't care to talk to you about it, Mr. Devine. I am going away, I tell you." There was a hint of suppressed agitation in her tone. Her brown eyes looked as if they might fill with tears at any moment.

"All right, all right," he said soothingly. "You needn't talk about it if you don't

want to; only it struck me as a little queer."

The Countess Vecchi allowed the suit case to slide to the floor and then she faced him resolutely.

"Mr. Devine," she said with the air of one who makes a crushing revelation, "I have found out all about it."

"Have you, though! Might I ask about what?"

"About you."

"Me!"

"Yes. I know why you are here. I know the whole meaning of your presence in this house and why you stay here."

"Good! You know a blamed sight more than I do then."

"It is useless for you to try to keep up the deceit any longer, Mr. Devine. My father has confessed the whole wretched story. He told me at first that you were merely here on some law business, but when

I heard that you were entertaining your friends here, just as you would in your own house, I demanded to be told the truth. And now I know. Oh, I know it all! This *is* your house. You own it. Somehow or other you have tricked my poor father out of it, and now our beau-beau-ti-ful ho-o-ome is yours. Dare you deny it? Come! Isn't it so?"

The "Cherub" bowed his head in meek submission.

"Then," exclaimed the Countess, "you are not only a wicked man, but you are deceitful, cruel! I despise you! You—you are—"

Just what else he was the astonished "Cherub" was never to know, for at that point the denunciation was interrupted. The threatening flood submerged the brown eyes, and the Countess, sinking down on the bottom stair, leaned against the carved newel post and sobbed tem-

pestuously into the ample sleeve of the silk coat.

For an age or so, perhaps only for a moment or two, Mr. Devine stood there and stared down at her, feeling about as helpless as a man who has started a machine which he does not know how to control. Twice he tried to say something, but the effort was vain, and when he did succeed in uttering words they were not particularly adapted to the occasion.

"Oh, say, now! See here, won't you? I didn't mean it. I take it all back; honest, I do. Come, now, let's talk it over. Oh, stop it, do stop it!"

These were some of his more intelligent phrases. They were accompanied by gestures. He shifted his weight uneasily from one foot to the other, thrust his hands deep down into his trousers' pockets and pulled them out again, ran his fingers through his hair, stepped toward the

Countess and then jumped warily back as another gust of sobbing shook her shoulders.

Finally his fingers found a cigar in his waistcoat pocket, and mechanically he stuck it between his teeth. This seemed to have a beneficial effect. He grew somewhat calmer and a trifle less incoherent.

“Stop it, can’t you? Oh, I say, stop it, now! Why the devil can’t you stop it?” This was more to the point, at least. Very earnestly he desired her to stop it.

But the Countess appeared to have no idea of stopping. She had only begun. To the “Cherub’s” urgent entreaties she paid not the slightest heed. He paced back and forth before her, making the same request with monotonous regularity at every turn.

After several moments of this idiocy there came to him an inspiration. Lifting up his voice he called for Eppings. At the

second call the sobbing ceased. Springing to her feet the Countess held up a warning hand.

"Don't you dare, Mr. Devine! I don't want Eppings."

"I want him, though; or your father. Perhaps I'd better get your father."

"No, no! I forbid you to call my father. He is asleep. Eppings is asleep. They are all asleep and—and I am going away."

To see her once more in a comparatively normal condition was a great relief to the "Cherub." The cyclone had passed. Tears still shone in her eyes, and she spoke in short, quick gasps, but evidently the worst of it was over. He sighed gratefully, and his reply was almost jubilant.

"To be sure you're going away; of course you are. But don't you think you could wait until morning, eh?"

"No, not a moment, not another moment!" Again she grasped the suit case.

"Well, that's too bad," said the "Cherub." "I don't see how you can go just now, though, for Eppings has locked up for the night, and I don't know how to undo all those bolts and things."

"You need not trouble, I can unlock the door myself."

She marched past him with as much dignity as it was possible to assume with a heavy weight dragging down one arm. At the door she made a determined attack on the bolts. Stupidly the "Cherub" watched her as she tugged away vainly.

"You had better wait until morning, hadn't you?" he suggested again.

To this she made no reply, but shoved and pulled at the stubborn bolts until she was forced to give up. Then, just as he had thought her beaten, she went promptly to one of the French windows in a front room, turned the catch and stepped out on the veranda. Mr. Devine followed.

"Come now, this is nonsense, you know. I can't let you go out alone like this, I can't do it."

"Mr. Devine," she said coldly, "I forbid you to try to detain me for an instant. I have no longer a right to remain in this house, and I refuse to stay. Nor have you any right to say that I shall stay."

The "Cherub" could think of no reasonable argument with which to combat this declaration.

"All right," he said. "I can't stop you from going, that's true enough; but if you go I shall go along, too, to see that nothing happens to you."

"I do not wish for your company, Mr. Devine."

"I suppose you don't, but I'm going, just the same. I'll get my coat and hat."

As he ran back into the hall he heard the Countess leave the veranda. Snatching up an opera hat and a rain-coat, he hurried out

through the window after her. She was easily overtaken, for the suit case acted as a brake.

"You'd better let me carry your bag," he said as he overtook her, but the offer was ignored, and the repulsed "Cherub" fell back a pace. Thus they started down the narrow gravelled path which wound a leisurely course in and out among the shrubbery towards the main road.

It was one of those moist, sultry nights which belong to August, but which sometimes come in early September. There was no moon. Low in the east the stars were shining, but the western sky was so black that the dark trees melted into it. The locusts and tree toads were shrilly piercing the silence.

Not swiftly, nor with much grace of motion, but with dogged persistence the Countess Vecchi fearlessly plunged into the darkness. Just behind came the "Cherub,"

following blindly and angrily chewing the end of an unlighted cigar.

Where were they going and why? Insistently he asked himself these things. Why did he not do something to arrest the development of this stupid adventure? Why didn't he act instead of trotting along behind like a docile pug dog? But he felt as utterly unable to control the situation as if he had been a man in a dream.

Here was the Countess Vecchi wandering out at midnight to go tramping along a country road with goodness only knew what destination in view. Also here he was, "Cherub" Devine, a full-grown man and the cause of it all, allowing her to do it!

The squeak of the suit-case handle, as the Countess swung the bag from one side to the other, roused him. He heard a dull thump as she bumped it awkwardly against her knees.

"See here," he said sternly, as he stepped

forward beside her, "you must let me take that bag."

"I shall not; I don't need your—" She began bravely enough, but the "Cherub" had already lifted it from her numbed fingers.

"I know you don't," he said, "but I've got the bag."

For another period they followed the curving path without an exchange of words. Their shoes crunched noisily on the gravel. The Countess, now that she was unhampered, stepped out so briskly that the "Cherub" fell behind several paces. Fearing that he would lose sight of her as she turned a sharp corner among the dense shadows, he hurried along at his best gait. He was not a good walker at any time, and now he was handicapped, not only by the weight of the suit case, but by his unfamiliarity with the route. Several times he blundered into a bunch of shrub-

bery, mistaking it for a shadow, the dew-laden branches stingingly reproving him for his error.

The Countess, however, seemed to know every bush and turning. She could walk well, too. Mr. Devine thought of a number of remarks which he wanted to make to her, suggestions which might have some effect towards staying the course of this inane expedition, but he was either too far behind to make himself heard, or else in catching up he had expended too much breath.

The noble proportions of the grounds about Hewington Acres began to impress themselves on his mind. When he had sat behind the chunky cobs and had been whirled over the drive from the big gates to the house, he hardly noticed the distance at all. He would have estimated it as about the length of a city block. Now he would have sworn that they had travelled

half a mile, and the stone gate posts were not yet visible.

A low grumble of distant thunder caused the Countess to slacken her pace and glance over her shoulder at the inky western sky. This allowed the "Cherub" to come within easy speaking distance.

"There!" he exclaimed reproachfully. "It's going to rain, you see. Did you hear that?"

"Yes, I heard." The Countess spoke as though the possibility of a shower could not concern her in the least.

"Well, we'd better go back right away," urged the "Cherub."

"You may go back whenever you like; I am going on."

"But where are you going? What are you going to do when you get there? Why are you going? Say, let's stop and talk it over. I think this is all nonsense."

The Countess stopped abruptly and

turned to say: "I think I told you, Mr. Devine, that I did not care to discuss my plans with you at all. Will you give me my bag?"

"No," said the "Cherub," "I shall lug it myself, and I shall follow you until I see you safe somewhere, even if I have to walk all night. But I don't see any use of being in such a rush. Let's take it a little easier."

"There is nothing to prevent you from going as slow as you like, Mr. Devine."

"Yes, there is," grumbled the "Cherub," "I've got to keep up with you. I don't know which way you're going. I'm not used to rambling about the country at night, you know. I'd lose my way and fall into things. Why, there isn't a single street light in sight, not one, and it's as dark as a pocket."

With a gesture of impatience the Countess resumed her way. The "Cherub" followed closely behind, resolved not to get

out of ear-shot again. He still clung to the idea that if he talked long enough he could bring her to reason. So he continued to announce at intervals such sentiments as these:

"It's just nonsense, you know, pure nonsense your starting off like this. And it's going to shower, too. There, that thunder is coming nearer! You'll be drenched. Then you'll take cold and die, and I shall be blamed for it. I never heard of such foolishness. I don't believe you know where you're going, anyway. Why can't you be sensible and go back home before it begins to rain?"

The fact that the Countess made no replies to his protests did not discourage him. About every dozen paces he would either think of some new argument or repeat an old one.

The situation became not only a dream, but a nightmare. The farther they pene-

trated into the night the more hopeless and impossible did it seem. When the gates of Hewington Acres were left behind and they took to the wide macadam road progress was easier. He forged ahead until he was almost abreast of the Countess, and to this position he stuck.

The growling of the thunder was growing more distinct and the lightning more frequent. As her face was lighted by the flashes he glanced expectantly at her, hoping that she would show some signs of alarm. But he saw no change in her expression. Her thin lips were tightly closed, and her chin was held high and firm. One would never guess from its soft curves that the owner had so much pluck. He began to admire her grit and courage. What an amazing young woman she was! In spite of everything, he had a certain respect for the way in which she held to her determination to quit her former home. He wished

she hadn't taken so much baggage, though. The suit case was getting to be exasperatingly cumbersome. What had she stuffed it with, anyway? Rocks?

He began to speculate as to how much farther the village could be. He thought they were headed in that direction, but it seemed as if they had walked miles. Once or twice he caught a glimpse of houses, their dark masses looming black and inhospitable behind hedges and trees. Yes, she must be making for the village. But every one would be asleep. The hotel, if there was one, would be closed.

A brisk breeze sprang up somewhere. The tree tops began to rock and sway like drunken men. Several sharp crashes of thunder came in quick succession, and the bare highway emerged for an instant from indistinct gloom as the lightning revealed every detail. Then there came a hush.

Big drops of rain fell with menacing impact on the crown of the "Cherub's" opera hat.

"There! I told you it was going to rain," he announced. "Hold on, now, I'm going to put this coat on you."

The Countess hesitated. He had dropped the bag, and was holding up the coat by the collar. Another and more vivid flash than any which had preceded it revealed him with photographic distinctness. She could not help noting that he looked very well in evening dress. He did not seem so much inclined to stoutness as he had in a business suit. She could even see a raindrop sparkling on his shirt bosom. This suggested something to her.

"No, you need the coat yourself. You'll be wet through in a moment." The big drops were coming faster now. They struck through her thin silk sleeves coldly on her arms.

"Will you put this coat on," he demanded, shaking it by way of emphasis, "or shall I throw it away?"

Then she allowed him to help her into the raincoat.

"Come on," he said, picking up the bag and starting ahead. The leadership, it seemed, had changed hands. Now it was the Countess who followed. The thunder-storm was developing finely. Crash followed crash. The rain was now drumming a roaring tattoo on the crown of his hat. The straw affair on her head had lost much of its jauntiness. The smooth surface of the macadam became as slippery as a greased plank.

"You must take my arm or you'll fall," ordered the "Cherub." Meekly she obeyed, and they went plunging and sliding through the storm.

"Oh, you're being drenched!" said the Countess. Apparently he did not hear.

"You are wet through, aren't you?" she shouted in his ear.

"Not quite," he answered calmly.
"Come on."

"But you *will* be drenched in a minute," she insisted. "I know you will," and she tugged at his arm as if to impress upon him the obvious fact.

"Well, what of it?"

"Oh, it's all my fault, it's my fault!"

"No, it isn't. You didn't want me to come. You wouldn't have started if I hadn't given that fool party. It's my own fault. Besides, I don't mind being wet. I like it."

For many minutes they continued the conversation on these lines, the Countess declaring that he was being drenched, and that it was her fault, the "Cherub" protesting that nothing suited him better than being drenched, and that it was no more than he deserved, anyway. Mainly they

shouted at each other, for the wind and the rain and the thunder made a grand hubbub about them. She was clinging to his arm, and when she turned to shout at him about his being drenched her chin almost rested on his shoulder. It was either that the wind buffeted her against him, or else she made a mis-step. At any rate, she found herself clasping him with both arms.

"I—I beg your pardon," she stammered.

"What!" he roared down at her.

"I—beg—your—pardon!" She fairly shrieked this into his ear, for the thunder was doing its best to drown her voice.

"Oh!" he said. "That's all right." A succeeding flash showed that his face, in spite of the coursing rivulets of rain, wore an expression of great contentment.

There ensued a period during which they stumbled and slid along in silence. At last they discovered several houses near the road.

"We're getting into the village," announced the "Cherub." "Isn't that where we want to go?"

"Yes," said the Countess, "I suppose so."

"But where? Whereabouts in the village?"

"The railroad station."

"The railroad station!" The "Cherub" echoed this as if he had never heard the words before. "What do you want to go there for?"

"Because I am going away," said the Countess wearily. "I'm going away."

Nothing could be more logical, of course. Yet somehow the "Cherub" felt that it was a ridiculous answer.

Five minutes later, when they reached the station, he saw with joy that it was one of those low, wide-roofed affairs, under whose eaves they could at least find shelter from the pelting rain.

The station was dark and all the doors were locked, of course, but there was a baggage truck. He dropped the suit case with a sigh of relief, and gently helped the Countess to a seat on the baggage truck. The rain was beating rhythmically on the tiled roof, and it gushed merrily from the copper leaders, but none of it could reach them. The "Cherub" took off his opera hat and shook the water from the soaked brim. Then he paced up and down before the truck on which the limp figure of the Countess leaned wretchedly. She must be cheered up, he decided.

"Well, this is something like, isn't it? Great, eh?" he demanded. At every step his shoes made a slushing sound.

"Your feet must be terribly wet," suggested the Countess.

"Wet! Oh, they're not so very wet. I feel fine after that walk, don't you?"

"I—I'm rather tired."

"Yes, probably you are. But now you can rest. You can rest while we are waiting for the train, you know. What time do we get a train, anyway?"

"There's one at half-past seven."

"Half-past seven! What, half-past seven in the morning!"

"Yes, that's the first one."

The "Cherub" took out his watch and tried to see the face of it, but there was not light enough.

"Look here," he said, leaning against the truck and peering at the Countess earnestly. "You don't mean to stay here until half-past seven, do you?"

"I—I don't know," said the Countess weakly. "I did when I started, but—but I'm tired now and wet and— Oh, I wish I hadn't come at all, I wish I hadn't."

"There, there!" said the "Cherub," patting her shoulder. "Don't you worry. I'll go and rout out some one. I'll get a team to take us back."

"No, no! I don't want to stay here alone. Please don't leave me here alone, Mr. Devine." She grasped his hand and clung to it tightly.

"All right, all right! I won't leave you. We'll go together and find some one. See, it isn't raining nearly so hard as it was. I think the shower must be almost over. Shall we start now?"

The Countess was quite ready. There was a livery stable just across from the station, she said. Fortunately they found a night hostler dozing in the office. It was with difficulty, however, that he could be induced to harness a pair of horses. His chief desire seemed to be to gaze at the dripping clothes of Mr. Devine.

"Look as if you'd been in swimmin'," he commented, surveying the "Cherub" with appreciative eye, from the soggy shoes to the shapeless linen rag which had once been a collar.

"Yes, that's the way I feel, too. But you hustle with that team, and we'll talk about the way I look afterward," said the "Cherub."

The drive back to Hewington Acres was silent and uneventful. Wrapped in two lap robes, the Countess occupied the rear seat. Mr. Devine sat with the driver, who finally became weary of trying to beguile the "Cherub" into conversation. Mr. Devine was wet and thoughtful. Frequently he glanced solicitously toward the still figure on the rear seat.

As they neared the house they saw that it was brightly illuminated. Out through the open front doors streamed a broad pathway of light across which figures were moving. One of these was Mr. Hewington. He was walking up and down with his hands clenched and his chin sunk on his chest. At the sound of the carriage wheels he started towards the door.

"Adèle!" he exclaimed with much dramatic fervor as he saw the Countess, and stretched out his arms to receive her. She went to him and promptly began to sob on his shoulder.

Next appeared the soggily clothed "Cherub" with the suit case. "Whew!" he exclaimed, throwing down the bag. Then, turning to the gaping butler: "Eppings, see if you can find me a dry cigar and a match."

"Mr. Devine, what does this mean, sir?" thundered Mr. Hewington. "I demand an explanation."

"Well, what do you want me to explain; that the rain is wet?" returned the "Cherub."

"This is no time for levity, sir. Adèle, please go upstairs." Mr. Hewington disengaged himself from the Countess and strode toward Mr. Devine threateningly.

"The poor darling!" murmured the

stout Mrs. Timmins from the background, glaring at the "Cherub."

"I want you to explain your astounding conduct, sir," repeated Mr. Hewington.

"Father, father!" pleaded the Countess. "I'll tell you all about it. Please don't ask Mr. Devine."

"Silence, Adèle. Go to your room. I will deal with this Mr. Devine."

At this moment Eppings created a diversion by coming in with a box of cigars and a lighted taper.

"Ah, thank you, Eppings." Mr. Devine indulged in two or three luxuriant puffs before replying.

"Now don't you be in a hurry, Mr. Hewington, and we'll clear this little mystery in no time," he said.

"Little mystery, sir!" The tall figure of Mr. Hewington stiffened with anger. "What do you mean, sir? I wake up in the middle of the night to discover that my

daughter has fled. I arouse Eppings to learn that he left you at eleven o'clock waiting for her in the library. I find the window open. I discover that you are both gone. And now, at this hour in the morning, you come back in a public carriage. You are a wretch, Mr. Devine, a scheming, villainous——”

“Stop, father, stop! This is too absurd.” The Countess Vecchi had stepped between the two men. “It was all my fault. I was running away, and Mr. Devine tried to stop me, and when I wouldn’t be stopped he went with me, and carried the bag. Then it rained and he got wet. And he brought me back from the village when I was tired. He has behaved splendidly. Don’t you dare call him any more names! He is splendid, splendid—and he is very wet.”

“I’m wet, all right,” commented the “Cherub,” looking down ruefully at the

little pool of water which had leaked from his clothes on the polished floor of the hall.

"Sure, he *is* wet," assented Mrs. Timmins solemnly.

Mr. Hewington's stern gaze changed into a puzzled stare.

"I don't understand, Adèle, just what explanation there is in Mr. Devine's being wet. I want to know why he induced you to run away with him."

"But he didn't induce me to run away, at all, father. He tried to stop me, and he made me wear his coat, and so got wet. He may take cold and die. See, he is dripping even now."

In a dazed manner Mr. Hewington inspected once more the obviously damp condition of Mr. Devine's raiment.

"Yes, yes, Adèle; I suppose it is all right, but it is not yet clear in my mind."

The "Cherub" was not inclined to continue the dialogue. "Oh, we'll straighten

that all out in the morning, Mr. Hewington. Just now I would advise you to see that the Countess is taken care of. She is tired and almost as wet as I am."

A moment later the chimes of a French clock announced the hour of three.

"Three o'clock!" exclaimed the "Cherub." "I don't believe you'll catch that seven-thirty train, will you, Countess?"

She had started up the stairs, but she turned to smile and shake her head. It was a friendly smile.

Five minutes afterward, as he began the task of shedding his soggy clothing, the "Cherub" caught sight of himself in a mirror. Regarding the disreputable reflection whimsically, he observed:

"You would give a party, would you! All on your own hook, too! And see what happened to you."

A hot bath, however, melted his cynicism. Having routed a chill and finished his

cigar, he regained his buoyancy of soul. The evening had not been entirely a failure. No, he distinctly recalled that she had smiled at him. It had been a friendly smile, too. And this was his last drowsy thought as he settled himself comfortably for a five-hour nap.

X

"BUT why should I stay here? Why do you want me to stay?"

The Countess was asking Mr. Devine these questions with as much sincerity as if there could be no possible reason why he should object to her leaving Hewington Acres.

"Why—why, because you ought to, because I want you to stay. Don't you see? I want you to stay."

For the better part of the day the "Cherub" had been waiting for just this opportunity. Now that it had come, he stood staring at her with a blank, baffled look in his blue eyes.

The Countess glanced curiously at him and then turned away with a light laugh.

"Do you think those are very good reasons, Mr. Devine?"

He had found her in her favorite retreat, a rustic summerhouse perched on a little point of rocks which jutted out into the Sound and marked the eastern boundary of the estate. She had been examining some papers from a japanned document box, but she hastily put them away when she saw him approaching.

The Countess showed no ill effects from her midnight walk in the rain, nor did she evince any inclination to review the adventure. It was when the "Cherub" had said that he hoped she had given up her idea of running away that she asked him why she should stay.

Seeing that his case needed strengthening, Mr. Devine prepared for the effort.

"Look here," he said, argumentatively, "you don't think that I came up here to drive you out of your home, do you? It

will amount to that if you insist on leaving. The place is big enough to hold all of us, isn't it? Why not stay here for a while, anyway?"

"It's very kind of you, Mr. Devine, I'm sure, but I don't feel that I can accept such a favour from—well, from a stranger, you know."

"We'll get acquainted, then."

But the Countess firmly held to the point. Hewington Acres was no longer her home, therefore she must leave it at once.

"Perhaps it *is* mine, but I don't want the place," urged the "Cherub." "I just bought it for a joke. I'll tell you what I'm going to do, I'm going to sell it back to your father. I'll let it go cheap for the sake of getting rid of it."

The Countess shook her head at this proposal. "Father could not buy it back," she said.

"Or I may rent it to him."

"No, we must go away somewhere and get another home, a home of our own." There came into the voice of the Countess a little quaver which made Mr. Devine feel that he had done a harsh and cruel thing.

"I believe it's just because I am here that you're in such a hurry to go. If I should clear out now and not come back until——"

"No, no," protested the Countess. "I shouldn't feel like staying a minute after you had gone, not a minute. While you are here I am, in a way, your guest; but if you were not here I should not have even that standing."

"Then I'll stay," declared the "Cherub." "I'll stay here a week, a month, any time."

"Oh, no, you wouldn't," quickly replied the Countess. "I have seen stock speculators before. They are just as much slaves of the market as the wretched men who haunt the gambling halls of Monte Carlo."

are slaves of the roulette wheel. No, you will be back in Wall Street to-morrow morning, eager for the game. It is all you live for—speculation, speculation! And, after all, it's only gambling on a big scale. No, you will go back in the morning, and by noon you will have forgotten that any such person as my poor self ever existed."

The "Cherub" was dumb before this outburst. It had been so unexpected.

"Of course, I have no right to say such things to you," she continued, more soberly. "I did not intend to say them either. You have been very kind to us, and I—I admire you in many ways. But you should not have tried to make me believe too much. I am not a silly schoolgirl, you know. I—I have had one experience with a man who was"—she hesitated at the confession—"who was a gambler."

She had turned to hide the sudden flush

that crept into her cheeks. Suppressed emotion was gently shaking her shoulders.

As in a flash "Cherub" Devine knew exactly what he wanted to do now, and it was only by clasping his hands resolutely behind his back that he kept from taking her in his arms and otherwise making a spectacle of himself. He saw it all. Even if she did despise him, he was in love with the Countess Vecchi.

The revelation came with stunning abruptness, like the glimpses of flooded roadway when the lightning had illuminated their way last night. Yes, he loved her. Promptly the "Cherub" blushed. The next moment, however, he went pale and held his breath. Could she suspect? Could she read it in his looks? Had she known it before he knew it himself? Women were so acute in these matters, he had heard. He hardly dared risk a glance to see if she knew.

If she should know! He was fairly appalled at his own audacity. Suppose she should be at this moment making the discovery which he had just made? Would she shrink away from him in terror, or would she laugh scornfully at him? For the "Cherub" it was a moment of tremendous suspense which lasted until he nerved himself to look at the Countess. She was sticking a long silver hatpin through the top of her hat and listlessly watching the dingy sails of a coasting schooner that was crawling up the Sound. He breathed more freely. She did not know, then.

"There, you'll forgive me, will you not?" she said, turning so quickly toward him that he started guiltily. "I didn't mean to lecture you, really I didn't. And now I must say good-bye."

"You—must—say—good-bye!" He repeated the words dully.

"Why, yes, I have decided to go to town

to-night. I shall ask you to let Timmins drive me to the station this time. You will not go until morning, I suppose."

"But I can't let you go away in this fashion. I don't want you to go at all; there's no need for it."

"You said that before. We've settled all that, you know."

The Countess pierced her hat with still another silver pin and picked up the japanned box.

"We hadn't settled it, though," eagerly protested the "Cherub." "You said you wouldn't think of staying after I went back, because there wouldn't be any host, didn't you?"

"Yes, it was something like that."

"And then I said I'd stay. Well, I meant it. I want you to see that I did. You can wait a day or two, until we make some arrangement. You haven't any particular place to go to, have you?"

"There are lots of hotels in New York," suggested the Countess.

"Hotels! Do you suppose we're going to let you run off to New York alone?"

"We?"

"Yes; your father and I. We have had a little talk about you."

"You and my father!" The Countess seemed incredulous.

"Yes. We were talking over a business matter, something about the terms on which he was to keep this place, and then we got to talking about you."

"Why, you—you surprise me, Mr. Devine. I had no idea that my father ever consulted you."

The "Cherub" smiled complacently. "He has, though. You're thinking of what he said last night when we came back from the village. But he didn't know how things stood then. We had an understanding this morning and we agreed that we

would try to make you see how foolish it was to run away. Hasn't he said anything about it?"

"Nothing that has influenced my plans."

"But you can see how I feel about it, can't you?" Mr. Devine flushed at his unfortunate wording of this appeal. What he was trying to do most was to conceal his real feelings. But he plunged boldly ahead with his argument. "That's why I am going to stay here until you have promised to be reasonable," was his closing declaration.

"Indeed!" A man with such deep knowledge of womankind as the "Cherub" thought he possessed would have detected a note of challenge in her tone. Mr. Devine, however, thought that he was managing the affair very cleverly, when she continued: "I suppose I may have time to think it over, if I am to reconsider?"

"Of course, all the time you want," he assented readily.

The Countess paused as if about to announce that she had already changed her mind. Then she looked up quickly and replied:

"This is Monday, isn't it? Well, by Wednesday night I shall probably be able to tell you exactly what I mean to do; that is, providing I am still here."

"But you can wait two days, can't you?"

"Yes, I can if you can."

Then the "Cherub" understood. She meant to take him at his word and hold him to it. Although he thought of many things which might happen to P. Z. & N. if for two whole days his watchful eyes should be taken from it, he did not flinch.

"I'm game," he said. "We will watch each other. I'll stay to see that you don't wander off among strangers with a hundred-pound suit case, and you look out that

I don't rush off to Wall Street to indulge my supposed mania for gambling."

Thus the pact was made between them; and they went back to the house for dinner.

XI

THE clanging of a big gong announces the daily openings of the New York Stock Exchange. During five years there had never been a morning when "Cherub" Devine was not to be found within earshot of that gong when it rang in Wall Street's brief but tumultuous day. He was to be found waiting with calm confidence whatever crisis, big or little, might arise, and generally there was something of the sort.

Yet here he was at opening hour on this post-holiday Tuesday morning, only vaguely conscious that he was miles away from it all. If he remembered, it was only the troublesome thought of a moment. What did he care if a thousand gongs were ringing to open a thousand stock exchanges? They might stay open forever

or close for good and all; he was helping the Countess Vecchi toss bits of sweet crackers to a pair of white swans.

When the dignified birds forgot their stately manners and squabbled over the tidbits, the Countess laughed. Especially charming when she laughed was the Countess Vecchi. Absurd little wrinkles appeared on her nose, and a spot of colour showed through the clear skin under either eye. A low, tripping laugh it was, with a slight quaver in it, like a tremolo organ note. Also, she had an odd little way of holding her head to one side and looking up at you when she laughed.

These were recent discoveries of the "Cherub's." He had made them unaided in one short forenoon as he accompanied the Countess on a voyage of discovery about Hewington Acres. He was immensely pleased that he had made them. Possibly he could not have told you much

about the various natural beauties which had been pointed out to him, but he could have discoursed enthusiastically and at length on certain graces possessed by the Countess.

Perhaps it was the clear, crisp September air, perhaps it was something else, which caused the "Cherub" to feel within him a new glow and thrill of mere existence. He himself did not entirely understand the origin of this feeling, but he had no inclination to analyze it. He was glad he was there. Especially he was glad that the Countess was there, too. Beyond that nothing was to be desired.

Thus it happened that the advent of a red-headed boy on a bicycle seemed almost an impertinence. The boy dropped his wheel on the lawn, pulled a thin, black book from his pocket, and held out a yellow envelope to Mr. Devine.

"Message for you," announced the boy.

"Honest!" said the "Cherub." "Aren't you joking?"

"The funeral-faced duck up to the house said it was for you," insisted the boy.

"Funeral-faced duck? Countess, do you recognize that word-painting of Eppings? Well, young man, you take that precious message back to the house, chuck it on the porch, and get Eppings to sign. Here's a dollar; one quarter for delivery charges, three for the word-painting."

He of the red hair grinned expansively and retired. For another delicious period they threw pieces of sweet crackers to the swans. Then the boy came back on his bicycle.

"Prepaid reply message!" was his second announcement.

"You're not fooling again, are you?" queried Mr. Devine, quizzically. "Say, you can write, can't you?"

"Yep."

"Want to earn another dollar?"

"Yep."

"Here it is, then. Chuck this message where you put the other one and tell whoever sent it that I'm very busy, or sick abed, or gone fishing—anything you think best—and sign it yourself."

This time the red-haired boy's grin was still more expansive as he pedalled joyously away.

"You don't seem greatly interested in your telegrams, Mr. Devine," observed the Countess. "I thought that telegrams always meant something important."

"Not this kind; I'll read them Thursday morning. Isn't there some place we can go where that boy can't find us again?"

"There's the garden. And you haven't seen the dahlias yet, have you?"

As a matter of fact, Mr. Devine did not know whether he had seen the dahlias or not. He wondered if they ran on four

legs, or had feathers. But he declared that he hadn't seen them and wanted to, so they were soon threading the intricate winding pathways where tall cannas flaunted their green and scarlet and the asters blazed like coloured stars. An hour later, when they returned to the house, they found the red-haired boy perched on the horse block.

"Three more!" he announced, producing his book. "And they all want rush answers."

"Good!" said Mr. Devine. "Give me your book a minute."

On the receipt blank he wrote "Refused" opposite his name.

"There! That ought to be almost as good as cutting the wires, hadn't it, sonny?"

"Guess that'll do the trick," observed the boy.

He of the red hair was correct, too. No more messages were sent up from the village, and Mr. Devine's afternoon was un-

disturbed, being devoted to making the impressive discovery that the Countess Vecchi's brown eyes were most interesting to watch.

Wednesday morning arrived in some miraculously abrupt fashion. It found them sitting in a sunny corner of the library. The "Cherub" was smoking one of his fat, black cigars, by special request of the Countess, and he was regarding with approving eyes her slim white fingers as they employed an ivory needle in the fash-ioning of some utterly useless affair that looked like a lot of holes edged with spider webs.

This was hardly the "Cherub" Devine of popular conception, you see. Yet he appeared highly content with himself and with the peaceful domestic surroundings. Between the Countess and Mr. Devine had gradually evolved that comfortable understanding which makes conversation a thing

to be dispensed with at will. There were many things which he wanted to say to her at some time or other, but now it was sufficient just to look at her.

She was wearing some kind of a house gown, with lace falling alluringly away from her white neck and rounded arms. Somehow or other the "Cherub" felt that he was enjoying a rare privilege. He was inclined to accept the gift humbly and in silence, fearful lest it be taken suddenly away from him.

And then came Eppings to announce the presence of Mr. Nicholas Walloway, adding that his errand was urgent and important.

"Nick Walloway, eh? You don't mind if I have him come in here, do you?" he asked of the Countess. Mr. Devine's motive in this was selfish. He would show Nick just how he was being blessed.

"Perhaps I had better take my work

into another room," suggested the Countess, starting to rise.

"No, no, don't disturb the cobwebs. Nick's business isn't half so important as he thinks it is. Bring him right in, Eppings."

"But I had rather not——"

Whatever her protest might have been, it was cut short by the prompt entrance of young Mr. Walloway. Across the room their eyes met, and in an instant there faded from his face all the eagerness, all the animation with which it had been lighted. He stopped abruptly, and it seemed as if his grey eyes stared hungrily at the pretty picture she made, standing there in the morning sunshine. The colour went from his cheeks, his lips were tensely drawn.

Next he swept a questioning glance at the "Cherub," who, leaning luxuriously back in his chair, regarded him with mild

satisfaction. The Countess, after one startled look, regained her usual calm poise. She even betrayed some amusement at the awkward pause. It was the "Cherub" who broke it.

"Well, Nick, you see I'm still rusticating. Great, isn't it?"

With an obvious effort young Mr. Walloway shook off his embarrassment. Acknowledging the Countess Vecchi with a stiffly formal bow, he turned to the "Cherub," and in another moment he was deep in the business which had brought him there.

"You must forgive me, Devine, for hunting you up like this, but I thought I ought to do it. It's a matter of business; couldn't we—" And he looked suggestively at the door.

"I haven't any office here, Nick, and this room is as good as any other. You mustn't mind, Countess; any business I do to-day will not take long."

"But—" began Mr. Walloway.

"Oh, let's have it, Nick. Bottom dropped out of something?" The "Cherub" was smiling amiably.

"I rather think you would have thought so if you had been on the floor just before closing yesterday. The Bates-Rimmer crowd is after P. Z. & N. I believe they mean to gobble it up."

"Ah, that gang, eh?" This time the "Cherub" showed his white teeth when he smiled.

"They began it as soon as they found you were not on deck, and they've been at it ever since. Your brokers nearly had a fit when they couldn't find you anywhere around town. They had ten clerks out looking for you."

"Got nervous, did they?"

"Nervous! Why, man, didn't you see where P. Z. & N. closed yesterday?"

"Haven't read a paper since I've been

here, Nick, and don't intend to. When you go back tell my brokers to keep cool."

"But the Bates-Rimmer crowd means mischief, Cherub. There's a lot of them in a big pool, and they're hammering your railroad holdings right and left. Some one has been leaking information, and they're hitting you where it will hurt. When I saw how things were going I began wiring you. Didn't you get the messages?"

"I knew those must be from you, Nick; no one else knew where I was."

"But why didn't you answer?"

"Well, I didn't read them, for one thing; I was too busy. We were having a bully time, the Countess and I, feeding the swans."

"Feeding the swans!" Mr. Nicholas Walloway made a gesture indicating despair.

“Did you ever watch swans squabble for sweet crackers, Nick?”

“Crackers! You might just as well have thrown bunches of thousand-dollar bills at them. Why, Cherub, P. Z. & N. opened at thirty-nine and five-eighths this morning. As soon as I found you hadn’t shown up I started for you. I had my car meet me at the station, and it’s outside now. We can just make the eleven-thirty back, and perhaps you’ll be in time to stop them before it’s all over. Come on, let’s start.”

“Sorry, Nick, but I couldn’t think of it. I’m taking a holiday, you see.”

“What! Do you mean to say that you’re not coming?” Mr. Walloway gazed doubtfully at the “Cherub.”

“Not to-day, Nick.”

“Oh, I say, Cherub, don’t be an—” He checked himself with a swift glance at the Countess, whose brown eyes in-

stantly sought the cobwebby stuff in her lap. "Don't be foolish," he continued. "I haven't told you all—the worst, you know."

"Well, you can tell me all about it to-morrow, Nick."

"To-morrow! Great Scott, man, you don't understand! They mean to finish the job to-day. To-morrow might as well be next year. Why, you've barely a fighting chance left now, and I don't know as you have that. The Street is wild with it. There's no knowing what has happened since I left. If you expect to save anything out of that deal, you've got to jump in and hustle.

"I guess things are not as bad as all that, Nick. I'll be down bright and early in the morning."

Mr. Walloway stared hard at his friend for a moment. Then he paced across the room two or three times, stared again,

started for the door and returned to put both hands on Mr. Devine's shoulders.

"Cherub," he said, speaking with an effort at calmness, "you're too good a man to be beaten by a gang like that. You must come back. You have friends, lots of them. We'll get them together and go after that crowd. Come on, Cherub, for your own sake."

Mr. Devine did not reply. He was looking with friendly interest at the man before him.

"Besides, it's the old Bates-Rimmer crowd," urged Walloway. "You know them; they're like a pack of mangy wolves."

"Yes, you're right, Nick. They've snapped at my heels many a time."

"And now they're at your throat, Cherub. Come on, won't you?"

For an instant the "Cherub" hesitated. Then he jumped to his feet. As he did

so he met the earnest eyes of the Countess Vecchi. Until then he seemed to have forgotten her presence.

"There!" exclaimed the "Cherub," "I had almost forgotten. I promised to drive you into the village this afternoon to buy some more stuff for making cobwebs, didn't I, Countess?"

"Timmings can do that, Mr. Devine," said the Countess.

"No, I'm going to do it myself. Besides, you were to make one of those Italian salad dressings for luncheon. Ever try one, Nick?"

Mr. Wallaway threw up his hands. "Devine," he said hoarsely, "I'll wait outside in my car for just three minutes and a half. If you are not there by the end of that time I'll have to go back without you."

"All right, Nick; much obliged for coming."

"But you'll send some word, even if you don't go, won't you?"

"You might give my regards to old Rimmer."

At the door Mr. Walloway consulted his watch and turned to remark, warningly: "Three minutes left, Cherub. I'll be waiting for you."

"Better not, Nick. So long."

Mr. Devine had followed his friend to the door. Now he returned, to find that the Countess had been looking expectantly after him. The cobwebby affair had been dropped hastily to the floor and lay tangled at her feet.

"This is folly, Mr. Devine, nothing but folly," she said, with an attempt at sternness.

"Perhaps," assented the "Cherub," carelessly; "but it's in a good cause."

"You mean that you are making this sacrifice to keep me from leaving the house that was once my home? Then I must tell

you that I shall not accept it. You must go at once."

"Come, come, now! Don't you take Nick Walloway too seriously. Nick's a little rattled, that's all. He hasn't been through as many of these affairs as I have."

"But isn't it true that your business enemies are taking advantage of your absence to make a combined attack?"

"Oh, those fellows are always ready for that sort of thing. I suppose they will do more or less damage, but I guess I can stand it."

"But you mustn't; no, you must not stay idly here on my account while they are plundering you in that cowardly way. You must go back with Mr. Walloway. Please, go!"

"No," said the "Cherub," doggedly. "I can't."

"Can't! Why can you not go?" She

was standing directly before him, holding out her hands in a pleading manner.

"Because—well, because I think more of showing you that I'm not a born gambler than I do for all the railroad stock in the country. That's why."

This came straight from the heart of "Cherub" Devine. There could be no mistaking either the tone or the look in his blue eyes. And the Countess could see and hear. She understood.

"Oh, oh!" There was surprise in the cry, perhaps joy. For an instant she hid her face in her hands. When she took them away the spots of colour were gleaming beneath her brown eyes. Shyly and very demurely she came to him with clasped hands and gazed up at him as if to search for the truth in his face.

"I believe you," she whispered. "Oh, I do believe in you! But I want you to go. Go this time, to please me."

"Honest? Are you sure you want me to go?" He gripped his hands tightly at his side as he looked at her.

"Yes, yes! Go and—and *smash* them." The fighting spirit of all the old Continental Hewingtons must have blazed up and burned anew in her brown eyes. "Don't let them beat you. Smash them hard!" She made a gesture with her soft, white hands to illustrate what she wished him to do. The "Cherub" smiled.

"But you will not run away while I am gone, will you?" he demanded.

"Perhaps not—if you smash them hard enough."

"Good for you, Countess! You're a trump! I'll go. I'll smash 'em or go to smash trying. But you're to stay here until—"

"Yes, yes, but you must hurry," urged the Countess. "Hurry; he is starting!"

Eluding the "Cherub's" attempt to take her hands in his, she dodged behind him, whirled him about by the shoulders, and pushed him toward the door.

"Hold on, Nick; I'm coming!" shouted the "Cherub."

He had just climbed into the already panting machine when the Countess ran down the steps and tossed a package to him.

"I almost forgot," she said, breathlessly. "I wanted to ask you to sell those for me. They're some stocks or bonds or something, and I want them sold. That's all. Don't stop! Hurry!" and she waved at them to be gone.

Through his dust goggles the alert chauffeur was watching Mr. Walloway for directions.

"Yes, yes, full speed!" said that gentleman, impatiently.

The inner works of the vehicle began to

whirr violently, the big car leaped forward, and a moment later the Countess Vecchi could see only a little cloud of dust that showed through the trees lining the road to the village.

XII

It remained for a train boy to disclose just how the public viewed the crisis in Mr. Devine's affairs. Half-way to the city the boy came aboard with the early afternoon editions. From the headlines it was evident that the disturbance in Wall Street had become a popular topic, the sensation of the hour.

One enterprising journal indulged in a half-page cartoon, which was supposed to represent the situation. It was entitled "Plucking a Cherub." A scandalous caricature of Mr. Devine it was, showing him most inadequately clothed, but possessed of a pair of wings from which a group of bad boys were gleefully pulling what few feathers remained, while the vic-

tim rubbed his fists into tear-leaking eyes and made no attempt at defence.

"Don't look at that, Cherub," urged Nick Walloway. "Throw the thing out of the window."

"Why, I think that's pretty good," commented the "Cherub." "They haven't made me any too handsome, have they? Nor old Rimmer, either. Say, isn't that the old pirate to the life, though? See that turnip nose of his, and that bull neck! And there's young Billy Rimmer, too, reaching up for a handful of feathers. Oh, my, my!" and Mr. Devine rocked mirthfully over the cartoon.

"It would be funnier if it wasn't so damned near the truth," growled Walloway. "Of course, I don't know just how deep you've plunged on this P. Z. & N. deal, but I gathered that you'd gone in rather steep."

"Yes," admitted the "Cherub," more

soberly, "I have. In fact, it's the biggest thing I ever tackled."

Nick Walloway gazed at him incredulously. "And right in the middle of it you take a day off to feed the swans at Hewington Acres!"

"I'd take a year off if it was necessary."

Young Mr. Walloway paled a little and shot a stealthy glance over his shoulder at the man beside him. He understood. There was no mistaking the new light that beamed from the "Cherub's" blue eyes. The Walloway jaw stiffened. For several moments nothing more was said. Then, in a voice strained and hard, a voice driven outward by an unbending will, Nicholas Walloway took up the broken thread of conversation.

"Devine," he began hesitatingly, "it's—the Countess, isn't it?"

The pink in the "Cherub's" chubby cheeks flashed up behind his ears. Trying

to subdue a decidedly school-boyish grin, he proceeded to make elaborate denial.

"The Countess!" he exclaimed. "Why, she's way out of my class, Nick. Oh, she's about a hundred per cent. too good for me—aristocratic, refined, old family and all that. Why, she wouldn't look at me, Nick, you know she wouldn't."

"I know that you've been looking at her and—and—" Something was interfering with the speech of young Mr. Walloway. However, he mastered the difficulty; suddenly reaching out, he grasped the "Cherub's" right hand and gave it a crushing grip. "I—I wish you luck, old man."

Perhaps Mr. Devine was a little surprised by this unexpected display of emotion from the usually reserved young man. If he was, he brushed it aside.

"Luck nothing, Nick! Much obliged for your good wishes, my boy, but I haven't the ghost of a show. Now, if I

was a chap like you, there'd be some hope for me. Say, Nick, I wonder you never took a——”

“Beg pardon, Devine, but let's stick to the point.” Young Mr. Walloway had retreated into his shell.

“Eh?” said the “Cherub,” quite bewildered by this sudden change of manner.

“Of course,” continued Nicholas, “I should not presume to intrude my advice on personal matters, but if I were you I would drop P. Z. & N. until you can give your whole time and thought to the business. Why don't you pull out?”

The “Cherub” ceased to stare dreamily. “Nick,” he said, abruptly, “I'll tell you something. I've changed my plans. I'm going to do something besides speculate in that stock. I'm going to buy that road, and I've got to get control before next Friday noon.”

“Cherub, you're crazy! It's impossible!

Why, the Bates-Rimmer crowd scooped in two-fifths of the stock yesterday, so they say. You know what that means; they'll wreck it, wring it dry. The small outside holders have been tumbling over each other to unload. See here—" and he pointed to a newspaper on his knee—" fifty lots offered during the first half hour to-day, and the quotations dropping by quarter points. Why, you can't stop 'em, man. They've got you on the run."

" Yes, yes, it looks like it, I know. But wait until I've had a chance at them. Let me think this thing over."

Mr. Nicholas Walloway withdrew into his corner of the smoking compartment to stare absent-mindedly out of the window. The "Cherub" was soon apparently engaged in a profound contemplation of the end of his cigar. You would not have guessed, to look at him, that he was considering anything more serious than the

flavor of the tobacco. Not until they were on the ferry did he break the silence. Then, briefly and crisply, he outlined his plan of action. Nick Walloway heard him through with a glow of admiration in his eyes.

"If you can do that, Cherub, you'll win," he declared; "but if the scheme slips up——"

"Then I'm down and out. But it's got to go through," and Mr. Devine's mouth lost some of its cherubic curves. "You'll do your part, Nick. Oh, it will be easier than you think! They'll never suspect you're in it. And don't try to report until eleven to-night. Then you know where to come—private dining-room, tenth floor. I'll have 'em all there at eleven."

Then the two men, to all intents, became as strangers in the crowd that surged through the ferry gates.

As you know, it was a great fight; not the greatest Wall Street has ever seen,

perhaps, but waged with the most bitter fury while it lasted. From a simple deal Mr. Devine's enterprise had developed into a struggle for mastery. A few hours before he had at risk only a small part of his fortune. Now he was preparing to stake it all, down to the last dollar.

When "Cherub" Devine appeared on the floor a half hour before closing time the rumours of his defeat were passing from mouth to mouth. The Bates-Rimmer retainers were indulging in a war dance of victory.

Silently the "Cherub" passed to his accustomed corner and began tearing pieces of paper into small bits with the same calm, unhurried air of abstraction as usual. Many glances were bestowed on him, most of them curious, a few sympathetic, some triumphantly vindictive. Everywhere he was regarded as a beaten man. Now and then a grey-uniformed floor boy handed

him messages, which he read leisurely and as leisurely reduced to fragments. Just as the session closed "Pop" Rimmer passed near him and turned to favour him with an ape-like leer. The "Cherub" blinked unresponsingly. He seemed too dazed by misfortune even to disguise his chagrin.

A somewhat different "Cherub" Devine it was, however, who met his half-dozen lieutenants that night behind the seclusion of safely locked doors on the tenth floor of a gaudy, big hotel. He had become an alert, masterful, confident person, who thrilled those about him by a revelation of unguessed resources and unsuspected reserves of force.

The conference was neither long nor noisy. During its progress were consumed half a case of mineral water, perhaps a pound of Edam and a dozen cigars. The affair was in sharp contrast to that ob-

strepitous gathering in the main dining hall of the same hostelry, where "Pop" Rimmer and his cohorts held high revel until three in the morning.

The climax of the struggle was reached during Thursday. Along about the noon hour the members of the Bates-Rimmer combination were forced to admit that the "Cherub" was still in the fight. They made the admission with profane unction. They did not understand why it was so. They only knew that in some mysterious manner their triumphant career had been checked. Hurriedly they gathered their forces to crush him. For a period it seemed that he had yielded again, and once more they were on the point of howling their glee, when the tide of battle began to turn against them for the second time.

Thus it went. All that afternoon the contest waged. Now the price of P. Z. &

N. stocks slumped desperately, now it skyrocketed amazingly. Other stocks were affected. The whole list quaked and quivered as the struggling giants of finance wrestled heedlessly about the arena. On the floor masses of white-faced brokers swayed and shouted in mad frenzy. In the packed galleries the fascinated spectators caught the wild spirit of the moment and watched with tense, straining eyes.

Placidly smoking a fat, black cigar and tilting comfortably back in one of Walloway & Co.'s mahogany office chairs, "Cherub" Devine received bulletins from the front. That was the position in which Nick Walloway found him when, after the day was over, he rushed in, haggard of face and with an anxious look in his eyes.

"We lack fifty shares," he announced briefly.

"Then that's fifty we must get to-morrow morning," responded the "Cherub."

"It can't be done," declared Walloway, dropping hopelessly into a chair. "The country has been raked with a fine-toothed comb. We can't get hold of another share. I'm sorry, Cherub, but I've done my best for you. The P. Z. & N.'s annual meeting is held at noon to-morrow and the Bates-Rimmer crowd has practically got us beaten now. If we only had just fifty shares more we could wipe them off the face of the earth."

"You're as bad as the Countess," chuckled the "Cherub," amicably. Then, as this reflection recalled something to his mind, he thrust his hand into an inner pocket of his coat and drew out a long envelope, at which he stared blankly.

A twinge of guilt pricked his conscience. There! he had completely forgotten the first errand with which she had entrusted him. Doubtless it was to exchange this stock for cash that she had been so anxious to come

to the city. Perhaps she had been expecting a remittance by every mail. And he had carried them about in his pocket all this time without giving them a thought! Well, he would attend to the sale of them the first thing on the morrow, no matter what else might transpire. Shamefacedly he opened the envelope to make an idle examination of the contents. At the first glimpse his expression changed. Hastily he ran through the documents, then shoved them back into the envelope.

A moment later he asked quietly: "How many shares did you say we lacked, Nick?"

"Fifty," gloomily responded Mr. Walloway, his head between his hands.

"And about how much would they be worth to me just now?"

"Worth! Why, anything—three hundred, five hundred, a thousand dollars a share, if you could get them—which you can't."

"No?" responded the "Cherub." "Well, what do you say to those?" and he tossed the long envelope to Walloway.

That young man took his head from between his hands and glanced reproachfully at the "Cherub." It was no time for joking. But he took the packet and began a spiritless investigation. Suddenly he jumped to his feet.

"Devine!" he exclaimed hoarsely. "These are P. Z. & N. preferred!"

"Sure." The "Cherub" was watching him with calm interest.

"And there are twenty-five—fifty—one hundred shares!"

"Right again, Nick."

"But where on earth—Cherub, are you a wizard?"

"Don't get excited, Nick, or go to calling me names, because I've had a little luck. Just make a note of it that I owe the Countess Vecchi a hundred thousand

dollars. Guess I can afford to pull the market a little on her account, eh?"

"Afford to! Why, Devine, this gives you control of the road. You've got the Bates-Rimmer crowd under your thumb. You've won, man; you've won!"

"Yes, I've won—a railroad. That's all I know how to win, I'm afraid. Come on, let's go have a game of billiards. I'll string you twenty buttons."

XIII

IN the life of J. Tasker Timmins, the one day which he recalls with a flush of pride and a sense of importance, is that memorable Friday when, between ten o'clock and three, he received no less than nine messages by telegraph. They were all from Mr. Devine. Sometimes the messenger found Timmins in the stable office, sometimes in the servants' quarters, and twice he discovered him waiting at the front entrance. Mrs. Timmins, who vainly demanded explanation of these things, alternately burned with curiosity and flamed with indignation. What game was Timmins up to, anyway? Why didn't he tell her what was going on? But Timmins would make no revelation.

As a matter of fact, Timmins himself

did not understand the full import of the messages. In the first one Mr. Devine asked if the Hewingtons were still there. In the second he demanded to be informed if the Countess Vecchi had gone. In the third he cautioned Timmins to wire him if the Countess made any preparation for leaving. In the fourth he asked solicitously as to the condition of the Countess Vecchi's sick aunt, whom he had never seen. Later telegrams instructed Timmins to meet various afternoon trains, and then told him to be at the station at five-thirty, as Mr. Devine was coming up on a special.

Eppings, also, was favoured with two messages, which notified him that Mr. Devine would be there for dinner, and finally the Countess herself received this communication: "Wait. Coming up to-night. Important."

As a result Hewington Acres hummed with anticipation. What could it mean?

What had happened? What was going to happen?

Eppings was certain that Mr. Devine was bringing home some titled guest, possibly a duke or a lord, and he prepared dinner accordingly. Timmins wrapped himself in an air of mystery and had the cobs groomed until their rounded quarters glistened like the bottom of a new tin pail. The Countess was puzzled. Even Mr. Hewington emerged from his study and wanted to know why every one seemed so disturbed.

"It's because of Mr. Devine, sir," said Eppings. "He's coming up on a special train, sir, and I must see about the table at once, sir."

"Dear, dear!" murmured Mr. Hewington.

Possibly the only person in the entire household who was neither flurried with excitement nor on tiptoe from anticipation was the Countess Vecchi. There was no

mystery in all this to her. That last moment when she had stood looking into the blue eyes of "Cherub" Devine had furnished her with a key which solved every riddle of his erratic moments.

Not that she had acknowledged as much to herself. There is at least one blissful period when a woman is content to feel that she is happy, without trying to trace the result back to the cause thereof. So amid all the rush and wondering she sat quietly in a corner of the library, a book in her lap, her back to the window, apparently unmindful of the hum of expectation that seemed to thrill in the very air. Her brow was tranquil, her lips now and then pursed themselves involuntarily into a little smile, and in her brown eyes glowed a steady light of peaceful joy. When she spoke, her tone was wonderfully soft. Her whole bearing said: "The world is kind; all is well."

Never before, perhaps, had the Countess

Vecchi attained quite such an angelic mood. Even her unobservant father noted it, and regarded her with perplexed awe. It is a pity the "Cherub" could not have seen her then, for such rare moods ought not to be wasted on unappreciative eyes.

And surely the particular frame of mind which Mr. Devine had conjured up for himself was quite worthy of a better audience than he gave it, although he was neither serene nor filled with confident joy. But he was very much alive. He bubbled, sparkled, scintillated. His mental faculties, never dull, were at their keenest. His spirits seemed to be lashed by a veritable storm of animation, one moment soaring to giddy heights, the next sinking to dark depths. One instant he would smoke furiously, his brows knitted in perplexed thought; the next he would be staring benignly into vacancy, as if watching some beautiful vision that only his eyes could see.

Young Mr. Walloway, who was his sole companion, was somewhat disgusted with this illogical behaviour. Much against his will he had been dragged from his office to accompany the "Cherub," just when there was much work to be done. A hundred odd ends connected with the great business of the day before remained to be caught up and tied into place. But the "Cherub" had insisted on carrying him off and putting him on board the special train which, in an unexplained whim of extravagance, had been ordered. At least Mr. Devine might employ the time by talking sanely about various points of the transaction which still needed his attention, but that is just what he would not do.

"Oh, the railroad be blowed, Nick! Lots of time to attend to that. Forget it."

Yet now that they were well started toward Hewington Acres, the "Cherub" evinced a desire to talk, although the pre-

cise topic at which he was aiming was not clear. It was unrelated to railroads, for the opening was of an intimate and personal nature.

"Nick, you rascal," he suddenly exclaimed, "why aren't you married?"

Young Mr. Walloway received this unprovoked query as merely another evidence of the "Cherub's" whimsical mood, and parried it accordingly.

"Why aren't *you*, Cherub?" he retorted.

"Me!" Mr. Devine affected to be profoundly surprised at such a question. "Now come, Nick; what sort of a woman would have Cherub Devine? And the kind that would take me I wouldn't have. So there's the answer to that."

"You're too modest, Cherub. You underrate yourself. I suppose you never tried?"

"Never had a chance, my boy. Why, see here, Nick, there's never been a time in

all my life that I've had even a speaking acquaintance with a real good woman, such as you know by the dozen—that is, leaving out the last few days, of course. Now with you, it's been different. You've had a chance to pick and choose."

"Ah, have I?"

Intent as he was on his own line of argument, "Cherub" Devine caught the subdued note of pain in the quick rejoinder.

"You don't mean, Nick, that you got a turn down?"

Brusque as were the words, they carried a message of sympathetic feeling which rang true, and that was the quality which made so many friends for "Cherub" Devine. However picturesquely trivial might be the form of his speech, you felt that back of it was sincerity. Young Mr. Walloway was certainly not the one to make offhand confidences, but he nodded his head in assent.

Unexpectedly finding himself an intruder on private grounds, Mr. Devine curbed his buoyancy and gazed with embarrassed emotion at the proprietor thereof. He wanted to back out as unobtrusively as possible, yet without appearing to make too hasty a retreat.

"Oh, well," he observed, "maybe you're just as well off. Guess it was some time ago, when you were young and vealy, eh?"

"I was a young ass, if that's what you mean," cynically responded Nicholas. "I was too sure of her, and played the fool. You see, we were youngsters together, playmates. It was one of those affairs that everybody understood was settled from the time we were a dozen years old. I took it as a matter of course that I was the only person she could ever care for. But she wasn't one to be treated in that way. In time she resented it, and before I knew it, I had lost her."

"Went off with some one else, did she?"

Again young Mr. Walloway inclined his head.

"Never run across another just like her, eh?" suggested the "Cherub."

"Nor ever shall."

Nicholas Walloway could be wonderfully solemn on occasions. He was now. Mr. Devine was impressed. He shook his head in sympathetic response, even attempted a sigh. Then he got up, took a seat on the other side of the car, and unfolded a newspaper. Somehow he felt unequal to sustaining for any length of time the proper attitude which such a pathetic condition of mind as that of Nicholas Walloway's seemed to demand. He could do it for a minute or so, but his own thoughts kept crowding in, and they were riotously inharmonious thoughts. He would leave Nick to smother the revived blaze as best he could. For himself, he wished to in-

dulge in the memory of a certain delicious moment, and to puzzle out just what it might or might not mean to him.

So the almost empty Pullman car, containing only these two, each buried with his own thoughts, rattled and pounded its way out across Long Island with as much speed as the limitations of train despatching allowed. It was less than an hour's ride at best, but before it was half over, "Cherub" Devine was consulting watch and time table, and had again shifted his seat to the forward chair, where he could watch for the name boards on the stations.

Perceiving this unusual agitation of a mind normally free from such disturbances, you might suspect that Mr. Devine was about to make some great venture. It was a fact. His plans, however, were somewhat vague. About the only definite part of his programme was his decision to turn himself out of house and home immediately upon

reaching Hewington Acres. This detail was already prepared. The Countess Vecchi should buy back the place at her own terms. She now had the means, and he was well assured of her desire to do so.

This accomplished, what course would be left open to him? Nothing but self-banishment. And to leave Hewington Acres without any hope of ever returning, to rebuild between himself and the Countess the social barrier which had only been broken down by the force of unique circumstance —this was far from what he desired. She alone could prevent such a catastrophe. But would she wish to prevent it? Would she not regard it rather as a deliverance than as a catastrophe? If so, what was the meaning of that last look he had seen in her brown eyes?

Small wonder, then, that "Cherub" Devine, in a brief period of time forgot all about the revived wretchedness of young

Mr. Walloway. A question suddenly occurring to the "Cherub," he abruptly walked back to where young Mr. Walloway still sat with sagged shoulders and forward tilted head, intently gazing at something he held shielded in his two hands.

His very attitude should have recalled to Mr. Devine their recent talk. But it failed to do so. Buried in his own immediate problem, he strode to the side of the young man unheedingly, and was about to speak, when his eyes fell on the object at which young Mr. Walloway was so earnestly gazing. It was nothing more than the gold oval which he wore as a watch fob. Dozens of times the "Cherub" had seen it dangling from the breast pocket of Nick's coat without specially remarking it. Now he noted that it was really a locket, for it was open. Glancing carelessly over Nick's shoulder, he saw it contained a picture, a

miniature on ivory. And the picture on which young Mr. Walloway was gazing with such rapt pathos was a likeness of the Countess Vecchi.

As the "Cherub" occasionally remarked to those who assumed that his chubbiness and urbanity of manner were accompanied by denseness of mind: "Oh, I can fall to a thing now and then without being pushed off the roof." And in that instant it was made clear to him that the woman whom Nicholas Walloway had loved and lost, and still continued to love, was the Countess Vecchi. There was nothing very subtle about the deduction, to be sure, for here was Nick brooding over her portrait, with the story of his blighted romance fresh from his lips.

Fortunately Mr. Devine had not spoken, and the roar of the car wheels had drowned his approach. Swiftly he withdrew. Then he sat down to ponder on the reversed situ-

ation. Did this revelation at all concern him or his hopes? Taking into account the buoyancy of "Cherub" Devine, you must admit that his first impulse was to deny that it did. Nick had had his day and his opportunity. Well, he was a duffer. He had doubtless allowed to slip past him many subsequent chances for retrieving that mistake, and was out of it. If he could not or would not win a woman like the Countess Vecchi, then it was high time he stood aside while another made the trial.

For quite abruptly the "Cherub" now came upon the realization of his own purposes. He was a little staggered by the discovery of his audacity, but this was no new sensation. His audacious flights were always more or less of an impromptu nature. In a moment he was smiling confidently, as was his custom when once he had decided upon a line of action, however unpromising might be the future. The heavier the clouds

ahead, the lighter the smile. Nick was a good fellow and all that, but if he chose to mope inactive in the background, let him stay there. He, "Cherub" Devine, would show him how to play the game boldly—perhaps how to win.

And then came the thought: Would that be absolutely just to the Countess Vecchi? She and Nicholas had been spoony on each other for years, and she must have liked Nick. He was a likeable fellow—clean, sturdy, substantial, one of her own class, and—oh, the "Cherub" winced at that—one whom she would call a gentleman. How was it she had defined a gentleman: honourable and thoughtful of others? But she had meant to include ever so much more. Yes, Nick would measure up to all her demands as to what a gentleman should be.

And had it been really she who had broken off the match, or was it due to the

ambitious plans of her father? Then after she had come back, humbled in spirit, the Hewington fortune dissipated, had she, perhaps, held Nick at arm's length because of her pride? Was this the reason of his seeming inaction? Had he been all the time waiting in the hope that some day she would relent, and might she not do so, now that in some measure her fortune had been restored? Ought not she to have the chance? Was not the opportunity for a free choice due to her? Shouldn't Nick have another show, too?

Floundering through some such maze of reasoning, the "Cherub" at last came to this brilliant conclusion, with only a faint suspicion that he was about to make an astonishing chump of himself. He even experienced a glow of satisfaction as he hastily mapped out his new programme. You would almost have thought, by the cheerful manner in which he laid it before

young Mr. Walloway, that he thought he was attaining a long-desired end.

"Well, Nick," he began, this time giving young Mr. Walloway due warning of his approach, "we're almost there. Now the first thing on the docket is for you to fix up this business about the house with the Countess."

"I?" exclaimed Nicholas.

"Why, sure. You know her better than I do. You go up and have a talk with her; tell her how you sold the stocks, and what she can buy back the property for."

"But—but—why don't you——"

"Me! Oh, I've got to skip back to town on this train. Just wanted to get you started straight. You can do it so much better than I can, being one of her own kind, and all that. Aren't afraid of the Countess, are you?"

"Why, no; but see here, Cherub——"

"Now that's all right, Nick. You can

do this fine. But, say, you call me up on the 'phone at my hotel to-night and let me know how you come out, eh? Don't forget that, about 9 o'clock. Just give me a line on how she takes it and so on. You'll have some report or other to make, I'll bet. Needn't make too much of my share in the business; just talk like I'd handed it over to you, as I have. You're equal to that job, aren't you?"

Now just what sort of mental process went on in the brain of Nicholas Walloway it would be vain to try to trace. He was a complex product whose character had been moulded not only by circumstances of birth and breeding, but by the strong stamp of heredity. Four generations back a shrewd and close-fisted old Dutch trader had laid the foundations of the Walloway fortune in a dingy, smelly store along the water front. Later the Walloways had become landowners, bankers, commanding figures

in commerce. They had been noted neither for public spirit nor heroic deeds, but they had prospered, until the father of Nicholas had shown his mediocre abilities, in a tilt with the Gould-Fiske ring, by losing the bulk of the money which had been left him. Meanwhile the Walloways, by merely drifting along, had found themselves accepted in a social circle of considerable prominence. Nicholas had come from college, neither laden with honours nor saddled with any disgrace, and had gone doggedly to work in the one field which he felt a Walloway might enter without losing social prestige.

So there you have him: a young man chiefly distinguished by a reserved stiffness of manner, a quality which often inspires a confidence that obvious genius fails to command. If, in hesitating to accept the advantage offered him by the impulsive Mr. Devine, he was troubled by problems of an ethical nature, he allowed them to be easily

swept away. For many months he had wanted to see the Countess Vecchi. Earnestly he had wished for a chance to talk to her alone, and now this very opportunity was thrust upon him.

"Well, Cherub, if you think you had better leave this to me, why, I——"

"Good! And don't forget about calling me up to-night to let me know what luck you have."

XIV

No hint of this altered programme, of course, had reached Hewington Acres, so it happened that when Timmins finally did bring up the lathered cobs with a fine flourish, the whole household was assembled to witness the "Cherub's" much-heralded return.

The Countess Vecchi had at the last moment abandoned her angelic pose and yielded to curiosity. Mr. Hewington was even more eager to learn what it was all about. Eppings was there from a solemn sense of duty; and behind him, whispering and craning their necks from doors and windows, were the other servants. Mr. Devine never knew just what he missed by backing out.

In his stead there stepped from the carriage Mr. Nicholas Walloway, outwardly

cool and self-possessed, but secretly very much at loss to know just how he should proceed. For a moment he regarded the expectant group with some astonishment. Then Mr. Hewington voiced the common thought in one question.

“Why, Nicholas, where is Mr. Devine?”

“Mr. Devine is on his way back to town.”

“But he sent word—” began the Countess, only to be stopped by Mr. Walloway’s hasty explanation.

“He has asked me to transact some business with you, Countess. Might I—er—” and he glanced significantly at the door.

The Countess Vecchi promptly led him into the library. When they were alone she demanded of him impatiently:

“Now what does this mean, Nicholas? And what about Mr. Devine?”

Mr. Walloway had seated himself at the library table and was sorting some documents. He started as he heard her address

him in that way. It had been years since she had called him Nicholas. Well, this was an auspicious beginning. He smiled indulgently, straightened his shoulders and placed his finger tips together in a judicial manner. It was rather an effective pose, indicating the patiently receptive mood of a superior mind.

“ My dear Adèle——”

“ Mr. Walloway! ” The Countess Vecchi could be a most explosive young person, and her brown eyes could simulate indignation very convincingly. Also, just at the present moment she was holding her chin very haughtily as she looked at him. Young Mr. Walloway’s judicial pose was rudely disturbed. In fact, he was somewhat confused.

“ But—but you called me Nicholas,” he protested.

“ I didn’t call you my dear Nicholas, did I? I want to know why Mr. Devine sent you instead of coming himself, and what

those papers are for. If they have anything to do with any more legal business, I don't want to see them."

Thus prodded and warned, Mr. Walloway proceeded to state, not at all in the way he had meant to put it, his errand. He told the Countess the amount for which the stocks had been sold, and of her opportunity to buy back Hewington Acres. The Countess Vecchi heard him with widening eyes.

"Do you mean to say that those things were worth all that money?" she demanded.

"At the time they were put on the market, they were."

"And I really have all that?"

"The check is drawn for the full amount, I believe, less the brokerage commission. Here it is." A little awed, she accepted the slip of pink paper and stared at it incredulously. Not that the Countess was unfamiliar with checks, for she had a more or less vague acquaintance with the mysteries

of a private bank account, but this was for a sum so much larger than any she had ever seen before.

“ You are sure there’s no mistake? ”

Mr. Walloway was quite sure. He explained that the shares had brought \$1,000 each, and that there were 100 of them.

“ But father has always assumed that these shares were worth only about——”

“ Your father would have made a different estimate if he had been following the quotations yesterday. That particular stock was very much in demand. It was skyrocketed.”

“ I don’t in the least understand,” said the Countess, referring once more to the check, “ but I hope that whoever paid that much for them could afford—why, here is Mr. Devine’s name! ”

“ Yes, he bought the shares, and he could well afford to at that price.”

“ Could he? Oh—and those horrid men

you were talking about— Did he smash them?"

Mr. Walloway indulged in a faint smile.

"He did smash them."

"But did he smash them hard, as hard as I told him to?"

"He made a very thorough job of it, quite thorough."

"Oh, goody!" The Countess Vecchi's hands were shut tight, her lithe figure was held very erect, her eyes were alight with exultation. Nicholas thought her a charming picture of vivacity, although in such moments he was always inclined to be a little afraid of her.

"I'm so glad," she continued. "You don't know how anxious I've been, for I couldn't help thinking that it was because of something I said which made him neglect his business and got him into all that trouble. But now it's all right. He has won. Isn't it fine?"

"Ye—e—es. It is very satisfactory—to us."

"And isn't he just splendid, Nicholas?"

Nicholas squirmed a little in his chair at that. This was hardly the sort of dialogue he had hoped to take part in.

"Mr. Devine is, in many ways, a—er—a remarkable man."

"If he were only something besides a stock gambler. If he would only apply his talents to something different."

Mr. Walloway's eyebrows lifted a trifle at this.

"I hadn't thought of his talents as being misdirected," he said slowly. "In fact, I hardly see how he could do better, and I have told him so. But he has evidently been listening to someone who thinks as you do, for he tells me that he has given up speculating in stocks."

"He—he has given up! Why? When?"

"At noon to-day, when he obtained con-

trol of the P. Z. & N. railroad and became its president."

"A railroad president! Why, that is quite—quite respectable, isn't it?"

"Almost," gravely assented Mr. Walloway.

"Then he *is* splendid!" declared the Countess, clasping her hands. "And don't you think, Nicholas, now that he has—well, reformed—that he will be asked about among nice people?"

"My dear Countess," began Nicholas, once more assuming the judicial pose, "you must not forget that he is still 'Cherub' Devine. As a successful manipulator of stock, he is entitled to respect; as a railroad president, he will be a financial power to be reckoned with; as to his social fitness, that is a matter to which I have not given the attention which you appear——"

"Am I being lectured, Nicholas Walloway?" asked the Countess demurely.

"I trust we have known each other long enough, Adèle, for me to offer a friendly suggestion. But if you resent such——"

"Oh, no. Go on, Nicholas. Your views are always delightfully instructive, and it has been so long since I have had the benefit of them. What else about Mr. Devine?"

Young Mr. Walloway flushed under the subtle mockery of her eyes. He could stand anything better than that.

"Nothing more, Countess," and he bowed stiffly. "Only I did not know that you considered Mr. Devine a—a——"

The Countess laughed lightly. "Oh, I've told him he wasn't."

"You—you said that to the 'Cherub' ?"

The Countess nodded.

"And he—what did he——"

"He said he had never claimed to be a gentleman."

"Ah!" Young Mr. Walloway seemed to

have gained a new viewpoint. His exclamation was one of relief. Now he could understand the attitude of the Countess towards "Cherub" Devine. It was merely an impersonal interest which she had taken in a somewhat picturesque public character whom she had chanced to see at close range. Wholly a natural interest, which the "Cherub" had interpreted most absurdly.

"I beg pardon for my suggestion," he went on. "I see you know the 'Cherub' better than I thought. Interesting chap, isn't he? He has his good points, too. Oh, really! Has a code of honour all his own, that he sticks to as faithfully as if it were—well, the accepted code. And he is generosity itself to those whom he fancies."

"Is he, indeed?"

There was an encouraging note in her tone which led Mr. Walloway to pursue the subject complacently.

"Oh, extremely! Now in the matter of

buying those shares: they were never actually quoted at that figure, you know; but he needed them very badly, and he fixed the price accordingly, whereas he might have purchased them for a fifth as much, and still paid you the highest market rate."

"Then he practically makes me a gift of this?" and the Countess fluttered the pink check disdainfully.

"Oh, no. Had I been selling the shares for you, knowing how badly he needed them, I could have forced him to pay even more. No, it was a business transaction; but generosity was displayed, none the less. And his offer to hand over Hewington Acres at your own terms; that is another example. Of course, he doesn't want the place on his hands, but he could readily dispose of it at a profit. Evidently he wishes you to retain possession, however."

"So it would appear," mused the Countess. "I wonder why?"

Nicholas pursed his lips quizzically and regarded the Countess with mild amusement, as though enjoying a joke which he was about to disclose.

"I suppose it has not occurred to you that he might be—well, interested in you?"

"Why, of course it has. He has been very good to us in a number of ways since he came out here. And we treated him very badly at first, too; but he and I have since grown to be very good friends."

"I'm afraid the 'Cherub' has gone a step or two further."

The Countess eyed him with cool unconcern.

"I'm afraid you are making rather an impudent guess, Mr. Walloway."

"But it's no guess. Devine told me himself—that is, he as good as confessed as much."

The brown eyes of the Countess Vecchi stared at him wonderingly for a moment.

Her calm poise was ruffled. Colour flashed into her cheeks betrayingly.

"Do you mean to imply that he talked to you of—of me?" she demanded.

"Well, I will admit that I drew him out. I could see it plain enough, you know; and when I asked him he didn't attempt to deny, although he did have the grace to protest his own unworthiness. Good of him, wasn't it? Oh yes, he has improved the opportunities you gave him. He has had the audacity to fall in love with you, Countess. My congratulations on your conquest."

Doubtless young Mr. Walloway thought he was conveying his warning of the "Cherub's" impertinence in quite a delicate manner. He held his head at a knowing angle, confidently watching the effect of his disclosure. Said effect was slow in developing. The lips of the Countess were pressed firmly together. Half of the pink check was crumpled in her closed fist. She appeared

to be holding herself in leash for some imminent outburst.

“Did—did you compare notes, perhaps?” she asked.

“Isn’t that rather unkind, Adèle? It was Devine who talked to me of you. Can you imagine me talking of you to him?”

“But you are certain that he is—is——”

“Oh, it’s a clear case. Why, he’s thought of no one else, nothing else but you, for the last few days. Really, you’ve no idea of the fellow’s audacity. But he doesn’t realize, of course.”

“Then just why, if he’s so bold, did he send you here to-day, instead of coming himself?”

“Unaccountable. Perhaps he flunked at the last moment. He may have thought you would not accept his favours if offered directly. So he asked me to come. Me! Isn’t that rich?”

“In just what way?” And so quietly did

she ask it that Nicholas should have had warning.

“Why, he doesn’t know how long I have waited for just such a chance. But you know, Adèle; and now——”

He had risen and was approaching the Countess with outstretched arms. All that was needed to complete the happy reunion was for her to throw herself into them. However, that was not precisely what happened.

“Nicholas,” said the Countess reprovingly, “sit down.”

“But if you will only just listen to——”

“Please sit down, Nicholas.”

Nicholas sat. Baffled, but still dignified, he regarded her with pleading eyes across the table.

“You used to tell me, Adèle, that you loved——”

“Did I? It’s no wonder, for you were forever mooning around asking me if I did.

But that was a long time ago, Nicholas, and you mustn't take it up again. Really, you mustn't."

"But I am offering—"

"Yes, yes, you were always offering, and it was very nice of you. But it's no use. I can't listen to you now. I simply can't."

"I can imagine no reason why you should refuse to hear me say that I love you and—"

"Well, there is a reason. If there wasn't I should invent one."

Young Mr. Walloway bowed a submissive head until the Walloway chin rested on the Walloway collar.

"I regret very deeply," he began, with great humility, "that anything I have just said—"

"Now that's better," said the Countess Vecchi, relenting cheerfully. "When you start regretting very deeply you don't in the least mean it, but you're on the right track."

Now forgive me for bringing you up so sharply and let us finish our business. Ought I to accept all this money for those shares?"

"Wouldn't it seem rather strange for you to demand less than is offered?"

"You're right. Well, I accept, then. And I do want to buy back our home here. But I feel I ought to deal directly with Mr. Devine himself, in that matter. There are details, you know, and I want to say a few things to him about— Well, you will see that he comes, will you? To-morrow, if possible. Is there anything else, Nicholas?"

If there was, Mr. Walloway could not think of it. So, assuming an air of stately gloom, he stalked away from Hewington Acres, yet sensible of a vague feeling of relief, as one who abandons for good a cherished folly. By the time dinner was over he had quite recovered his usual poise and felt

equal to the task of calling up Mr. Devine.

"Well?" queried the "Cherub" eagerly. "How did you come on with the Countess?"

"Excellent!" said Mr. Walloway, thinking only of the business he had been asked to transact. "It's all settled. She accepts."

"What's that, Nick? Accepts who?"

"Why, the check. She will buy back the property, too."

"Oh! Is that all?" An unmistakable sigh of satisfaction came over the wires.

"She wants to see you about it, though—says she must deal direct. Wants to know if you can come to-morrow."

"Why, sure, I can. But say, Nick, are you certain there's nothing else? No congratulations coming from me?"

"Why—er—you might congratulate the Countess on making a good bargain, if you wish."

This was indefinite, but convincing.

"Poor old Nick," said the "Cherub," as he hung up the receiver. "He's had his try-out, though. To-morrow it'll be up to me."

XV

To be unfettered by the hazards of the coming hours is one of the characteristics of a buoyant soul. So "Cherub" Devine, having resolutely slashed away all the entangling mesh of business cares, went smilingly out to Hewington Acres and into the presence of the Countess Vecchi. What was to be the exact nature of that interview he made no attempt to guess. Where the Countess was concerned he had given up making plans. He was in the hands of his fate. But that it was a kindly fate he somehow felt assured. So he chuckled at Timmins, winked riotously at the solemn Eppings, and entered the library with a springy step, a jaunty air.

"Well, Countess, we smashed 'em, did-

n't we? And you had a hand in it, after all. Nick told you, eh?"

Evidently she had been standing there in the window recess waiting for him. Whether by accident or design, it proved to be a very effective pose, for the slender gracefulness of her dark robed figure came out in strong relief against the dull green window hangings, and the mellow afternoon light showed the hint of colour in the long oval of her cheek. She seemed taller by several inches. And there was in her manner a deliberate calmness that he had never before noted.

"Yes, Nicholas has told me, Mr. Devine—told me all about everything. In fact, he made quite a full confession."

Decidedly this was not a cordial opening. Her tone was cool, almost cynical. Something was wrong.

"I hope Nick didn't overdo the thing, Countess. Did he?"

"I'm sure I don't know, Mr. Devine. That all depends upon how much you intended him to say."

"Well, he told you about how handy those shares came in?"

"Yes."

"And the price he got for them? And how I wanted you to buy back the house?"

"All of those things Nicholas explained fully."

"And it's all right, isn't it? Any hitch over details?"

The Countess walked to a table and picked up a long document envelope. The thought occurred to Mr. Devine that this was an extremely businesslike meeting. Well, perhaps it would be different when everything had been settled. But who would have guessed that she could assume such an air. Wasn't she a wonder, though?

"I merely wish to understand clearly

your proposals," she was saying. " You sent Mr. Walloway here to offer me this check and an opportunity to buy back Hewington Acres for the price you paid. Is that correct? "

" That's O. K., Countess."

" Also you confided to Mr. Walloway that you were—that you entertained certain sentiments of regard for me. You called it love, I believe."

" Eh? " ejaculated the astonished " Cherub."

" I don't care to speak plainer, Mr. Devine. You know what I mean."

" Say, Nick didn't give me away like that, did he? Honest, he wasn't chump enough to let on that I said— Oh, come, Countess; did he, now? "

The confusion and distress of the " Cherub " moved her not at all. She watched him with keenly critical eyes, only betraying her impatience by the restless way in which she

tapped one open palm with the long envelope.

“ Since you admit that there was a confidence to be betrayed, it is perfectly plain that he did tell me, isn’t it? I couldn’t have known unless he did, could I? ”

“ Phew! ” exploded the “ Cherub, ” indicating a climax of surprise. “ Now wasn’t that a nice thing for him to do? Wasn’t it, eh? ”

“ I have been more interested in wondering just why you should have confided anything of the sort to anyone. May I inquire if you have spread this remarkable piece of news broadcast? ”

“ Ouch! Say, Countess, that’s what I call rubbing it in. You don’t think I would—— ”

“ I am quite anxious to hope that you did not. To be made the topic of such an intimate disclosure . . . and by a person whom I have known for such a short

time . . . under such peculiar conditions . . . you can fancy, perhaps, that I'd rather not dwell on it?"

"Great Scott, yes!" groaned the "Cherub," beginning to wipe his forehead. "But give me a show here, Countess. I'm trying to think how I came to do the sieve act. Oh, I must have done it, all right, but how——"

"I'm afraid I can't share your interest in that problem. Let us not go into it any deeper, if you please. You told Mr. Walloway, and then——"

"Ah, I remember. He wished me luck. Wasn't that nice of him, when . . ."

The "Cherub" found himself gazing with fascinated intentness at a pair of brown eyes which seemed to his excited imagination to be emitting showers of sparks, like Roman candles.

"When what?" spurred on the Countess.

"Why, when—when he was in the same boat."

"So Mr. Walloway exchanged confidences, did he? Delightful!"

"No, no! Nick didn't say a word. I found it out by accident. Saw your picture in his locket, you know—and I'd heard about how he and you used to—"

"Really! I am glad that there was some reserve in that discussion. Was it held on a street corner, or in a hotel lobby, or—"

"Train," groaned the "Cherub."

"Ah!" said the Countess. "The other passengers must have been entertained. Did any of them offer advice?"

The "Cherub" sank into a chair.

"That's right," he observed. "Keep it up. I deserve it."

"Remorse," commented the Countess, "is always touching, but it arrives so late in the day. I am curious on only one point. Having made your confession to Mr. Walloway, and having learned of his—well, his attitude toward me—what prompted you to send him here?"

"Why, I thought Nick ought to have his chance."

"You—you thought—" The Countess Vecchi appeared to grasp his meaning but slowly. Her brown eyes no longer resembled any kind of fireworks. They regarded him with wide wonder.

"You see," continued the "Cherub" earnestly, "he's so much nearer your kind of a chap—in your class and all that—and I didn't know how you two stood, you know . . . why, it didn't look just right for me to butt in before . . . well, before you and Nick had a show to make it up, if you wanted to. That's all. It was only right."

Of all the confident jauntiness with which the "Cherub" had entered the room not a trace remained. With lowered eyes he sat and mused upon the enormity of his recent folly. He no longer dared to look at the Countess. If he had he would have seen that she was biting her lips as if trying to

repress some sudden emotion. He might even have noticed that her eyes were moist. It was just as well that these evidences were unseen by him. He would hardly have understood.

The silence which had followed his explanation lasted for several moments, and when the Countess Vecchi again spoke, the clear-cut sharpness of her tone was somewhat softened.

"I understand. I believe I have been told by some one that you had a code of honour that was all your own. Well, have you heard what use Mr. Walloway made of his opportunity?"

"I had him call me up last night. I couldn't ask him right out, you know, but——"

"More delicacy!" murmured the Countess.

"Oh, that's nothing for me. But I made him say enough so I could guess how he

came out. You told him he wouldn't do, didn't you?"

The shoulders of the Countess Vecchi lifted a trifle at this.

"I tried to be entirely frank with Mr. Walloway, as I am now trying to be frank with you, Mr. Devine. I wish to ask you if my acceptance of this check is a purely business transaction."

"Why, sure!"

"You would have paid as much to any one else?"

"Been glad to."

"And about your offer of Hewington Acres?"

"Straight business."

"I am put under no obligations, real or implied?"

"I'm the one to say much obliged."

"Then I accept both proposals; and, as I suggested to Mr. Walloway, if there is nothing more—" She broke off the sen-

tence with a significant upward inflection.

"Z-z-zing!" responded the "Cherub" under his breath. "Did you give it to him as strong as that? Say, that's enough! You don't even have to open the door. And I don't blame you, mind. I ought to have known better. Generally, I do, too; but lately it seems as if I'd had a rush of foolishness to the head. I'll be going now, Countess. Good-bye."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Devine."

As he had found her, so she stood when he turned to leave the library. About her erect figure there was almost the suggestion of a highly strung bow, which he took to mean that she was immensely displeased with him.

What a mess he had made of everything, to be sure! It was bad enough for him to be so foolish as to think that the Countess Vecchi should take more than a passing interest in such a man as he. But for her to

hear of his folly from someone else—to know that he had been so silly as to talk about it—he wondered that she had allowed him to come within a mile of her. He supposed she thought she must, because of that petty house business. Well, it was all over, and he was being sent home like an impudent school boy. He had not even had sense enough to attempt an apology.

Absorbed in these uncomfortable reflections, the "Cherub" narrowly escaped a collision with the solemnly alert Eppings, who had stalked forward to open the door.

"Eppings," observed the "Cherub," fixing on that personage a repentant gaze, "I take it all back. I know just how you feel about that lost grandmother."

"Beg pardon, sir; but I 'opes not, sir."

"I do, though, and I'm afraid it's going to be a chronic case."

The door swung open. Still the "Cherub" hesitated. Was it his characteristic re-

luctance to acknowledge defeat, or a sense of not having lived up to his own code? He might at least have told her he was sorry.

"Wait a minute, Eppings. Guess I've forgotten something."

A few resolute strides took him back into the room where he had left her. Perhaps she had not gone. No, there she was, but—Why, what was up now? It was quite obvious that the Countess Vecchi had buried her face in the window draperies and was leaning against the wall of the room. Moreover, from the convulsive rise and fall of her shoulders, it looked as if she were sobbing. Mr. Devine stared at this unexpected revelation for a long, conscience-stricken moment. Then he overcame the choking sensation in his throat and remarked huskily:

"Countess!"

"Oh!" As she wheeled quickly toward him, saw who it was, realized that he was

standing there looking at her, she dabbed furtively at her brimming eyes with a wholly inadequate handkerchief. "I—I thought," she went on, "that you had—had——"

"Yes, but I came back. You're not crying, are you?"

"Crying! Certainly not!"

"No?"

"Well, if I was? I'm not now. I shall not again—ever."

"That's right. You see, Countess, I'm going to feel badly enough about this fluke of mine to do for both of us. That's what I came back to say. I don't know just how to put it, but if there's anything I can do to make you forget that there's such a person as 'Cherub' Devine, I'll do it—even if it comes to jumping off the dock."

"There—there isn't anything."

"Well, maybe it'll be some satisfaction to you to know that I feel like—well, like 5% off and nothing bid. Honest, I never meant

to tell Nick. I was just going to—" the "Cherub" faltered.

" You were going to do what? " suggested the Countess.

" Why, to spring it on you. Oh, I can guess what you would say to it, but—but—See here, Countess, I couldn't help it. You're the best I ever knew. Just seeing you these few days made things seem worth while. Why, I didn't know what I was living for before. And then, before I knew how far I'd gone, I was seeing nothing but you. I wish I could tell you all about that, Countess."

" No, no, you mustn't! " Again she turned to the draperies, hiding her flushed face in her hands.

" Maybe if you hadn't read so many of those newspaper yarns about me——"

" It isn't that; truly it is not," came in muffled tones from the Countess.

" Of course, I can see where I don't

measure up with the kind of men you've known, and I tried to keep that in mind all the time, but—well, I couldn't do it, that's all. You see, I haven't had much use for women. I thought they were all alike. But you—you're different, Countess. I wish I was different, too. I wish I was more like Nick. If I was, perhaps I could make you see how much I need you—how— Oh, say, Countess, couldn't you just let me say——”

“No, no, don't say it, please.” This came faintly, for her face was still hidden.

“All right, I won't.” The “Cherub” seemed to be swallowing the words. “Then I suppose it's—it's good-bye?” He was near her now, quite near, inspecting with helpless masculine anxiety the outward aspects of her distress. He noted the subdued tremors which came and went with her sobs. “I'm sorry,” he went on. “But Nick would have guessed it, anyway. Not all, though. He don't know how much . . .

I wish you knew, Countess; I wish . . .”

Just why it should have happened then, or at all, “Cherub” Devine will never understand. But the inexplicable arrived. He was aware of a sudden deep sob, which seemed to shake from crown to heel the graceful figure before him. He heard a half articulated exclamation, saw her turn waveringly towards him, and in the next instant she was in his arms. Abruptly the old audacity had rushed upon him, and he had accomplished the improbable.

Nor did that complete the miracle. She was clinging to him, one soft arm against his cheek, her warmly tinted face raised to his, her moist brown eyes shining under long-lashed, half-closed lids.

“I know. I have known,” she was whispering, as one who pants out a message after a long, hard run.

It was amazing, marvellous. The “Cherub” could hardly believe that it was true.

Yet here she was, all her sweetness and grace clasped in his arms.

“Countess!” he breathed. “Then—then you——”

“Yes, Cherub.”

“And you will——”

“No, no!” Suddenly she was no longer passive. She struggled to free herself. “Oh, you must leave me. There’s something—I can’t tell you. But I can’t see you again—perhaps not for years. Oh, you must go away!”

“Go!” echoed the “Cherub.”

“Yes, go and forget. Indeed you must. Please go.”

“Yes, yes, Countess, I’ll go; but not until—” impetuously he drew her face up to his until their lips met. It was no hasty, inaccurate performance. He made a thorough and highly satisfactory job of it before she could slip away from him.

“Now go, go; please go!” she pleaded.

"It's the last thing I'd want to do," said the "Cherub," "but if you say I must . . ."

"Oh, indeed you must! I've been weak, wickedly weak! And you must go away. No, don't look at me again, nor remember me. Go!"

Without in the least trying to fathom this mystery, conscious only of one established and wonderful fact, "Cherub" Devine reluctantly obeyed. Whether he walked soberly down the carriage road, or whether he floated through the air, he could not have told. He had a vague recollection of having slapped Eppings on the back, of having waved away a waiting carriage.

Only when he reached the big stone gates was he sufficiently composed to take note of concrete objects. And then he realized that some one was peering at him from behind a bunch of shrubbery.

XVI

Now, one doesn't expect to find a man in frock coat and silk hat dodging behind bushes on a place like Hewington Acres. Yet "Cherub" Devine had come to associate that particular part of Long Island with all sorts of surprises. He was inclined to accept this new manifestation as part of the general programme.

It appeared that this new arrival had intended to see without being seen, but he had not been quite quick enough. Without stopping to consider just why he was doing it, Mr. Devine promptly joined in the game by stepping into the shrubbery also. His action was due more to impulsive instinct than to logical curiosity. Besides, his mood fitted just that sort of enterprise.

The "Cherub's" next move was to part

the bushes cautiously and peer through. He discovered the stranger doing the same thing. Then began a series of manœuvres participated in by the silk-hatted individual and the new president of the P. Z. & N. railroad. Although somewhat heavy and entirely unused to this sort of thing, the "Cherub" was light of foot and surprisingly agile. But the stranger's movements were still more lively. Twice the "Cherub" stole stealthily around a bush, sure of having executed a successful flank movement on the unknown, only to find that he had disappeared like a flash. Once he caught a glimpse of him darting across an open stretch of lawn with the speed of a Marathon champion.

"Too much of a sprinter for me," mused the "Cherub." "I'll have to use tactics."

Taking off his straw hat, he balanced it carefully on the top of a rhododendron and began making a cautious détour. To walk

in a stooping position for any distance, one needs to be in good condition, and a 38 waist measure doesn't help. The "Cherub" was already red of face and breathing heavily, when he suddenly rounded a little thicket of stunted firs and found himself within arm's length of a slender, sallow-faced person, who was holding a silk hat behind him and intently gazing at the crown of a straw one which showed above a bush some twenty yards away.

Even a side view from behind was enough to reveal the foreigner, for the jet black moustache and the little underlip tuft that curled over the chin were distinctly of alien cut and trim. Then there was the word "Roma" plainly stamped on the leather sweatband of the hat. A man in the early thirties, he looked to be.

Just at that moment his whole attitude was one of alertness; from the angle at which he held his head, to the poise of his

body, one foot advanced, ready for an instant change of base. Silently and with much good humour the "Cherub" regarded him for a few seconds. Then, with an audible chuckle, he stepped up, tapped him on the shoulder, and observed inquiringly:

"Well? What's the game?"

The stranger should have jumped, thrown up his hands, and uttered some picturesque exclamation in a foreign tongue. At least, he might have exhibited a decent amount of surprise. But he did not. He was an amazingly cool sort. He merely turned quickly, measured Mr. Devine with one flash of keen brown eyes, lifted his brows expressively, and shrugged his shoulders.

"Bah! A trick!" he commented.

"Why not? Didn't you start this hide-and-go-seek business? Now perhaps you'll tell me what it is all about."

The stranger's response to this was a politely impudent stare.

"I do not quite understand," he said, with just the slightest foreign accent.

"No?" drawled the "Cherub" mockingly. "Then there's two of us in the dark. But perhaps we can clear matters up. I found you skulking in the bushes. Now why?"

A flush of colour appeared under the dark olive of the stranger's face. He stiffened and replaced the silk hat with much dignity.

"Beg pardon, sir, but I do not recognize your right to question me in that manner."

"Whe—e—e—ew! What a haughty little man it is!" laughed the "Cherub." "Ah, come down off the step ladder! A minute or two ago you were dodging around as guilty as if you'd robbed a fruit stand. Now, what are you up to?"

There was no threatening note in Mr. Devine's words, but much earnestness. The silk-hatted person eyed him attentively while

he was speaking, but when he had finished he turned, produced a cigarette, and proceeded to light it with calm indifference. Not until he had enjoyed several soothing puffs did he make any retort.

"I am attending to my own affairs, sir."

"Then I'll help you," said the "Cherub," "for I'm a good deal interested in this place and what is going on here."

"Indeed!" Again the stranger shrugged his shoulders. "But I don't know you, sir."

"Didn't act as if you wanted to, either. But here's where we get acquainted, just the same. My name's Devine—'Cherub' Devine."

"Eh? What!" gasped the stranger, staring incredulously. "Why—er—a thousand pardons, Mr. Devine; allow me," and he hastily brought out a card case.

"Luigi Salvatore y Vecchi," read the "Cherub," with some hesitancy in pronouncing the names. "Vecchi, eh? Ah, I

see! Some relation of the late Count's?"

The stranger smiled indulgently.

"I am known as Count Vecchi."

Had the "Cherub" been at all emotional, he would have gasped then. As it was, he nearly did, but seemed to recover in time.

"Oh, then you're the new one?"

Once more the smile of indulgence.

"No. I have been Count Vecchi for a good many years."

Mr. Devine devoted a moment to puzzling over this statement, and then gave it up.

"But—but you're not the Count Vecchi who—who married Miss Hewington?"

The cigarette was waved towards the rim of the silk hat.

"I have that honour."

It was the "Cherub's" turn to stare incredulously.

"See here," he said protestingly, "either you're a dead Count, or a live liar, and I guess the last description fits best. Come,

come! You've sprung that bluff on the wrong person. I happen to know, my friend, that the real Count Vecchi has been dead for a couple of years. Now what have you got to say to that?"

"I can only quote the words of your own great humourist, that 'the reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated.' However, I admit that such reports were circulated. But here I am, you see."

The "Cherub" looked, a troubled, searching look. What he saw was a man very much alive and quite self-possessed. Incidentally he noted that the leather card case which the stranger still held in his hand bore a silver crest similar to the one he had noticed on the writing paper of the Countess Vecchi. Not that he was wholly convinced by such a trifle, but his former assurance of the Count's demise was somewhat shaken.

"Yes, I see," he admitted without enthusiasm. "All a mistake, was it? And you've

come over to give the Countess a pleasant little surprise, eh?"

"I hardly think the Countess will be surprised," and the Count lifted his black eyebrows meaningly.

Instantly the situation cleared for the "Cherub." So that was what she had meant by her mysterious protests?

"Oh, ho! Then she knew all along that—that— Oh, come! do you think I can swallow that? Why, say, you blamed bush dodger, do you expect me to believe she would deliberately tell me——"

"Ah, but that's just the point," broke in the Count. "Did she?"

And, when he came to think it over, the "Cherub" could not recall that the Countess Vecchi had ever said or implied that her husband was dead.

"No—o—o, I guess she didn't. But every one else about the place——"

"It's quite probable," answered the

Count. "The wish, you know, is father to the thought. Probably you are aware of the fact that as a husband and son-in-law I am quite unsatisfactory. Doubtless Mr. Hewington puts it even stronger than that."

"He hasn't to me."

"How considerate of him! But the Countess, I'll venture to say, doesn't hesitate to credit me with all the vices."

"Guess you've forgotten that she was a lady before she was a Countess. I'll bet she hasn't spoken your name for a year."

"She feels as bitterly as that, does she?" The Count laughed more or less convincingly. "Well, well, I'm sorry she takes it so hard. It's a fact that, as the English have it, we didn't hit it off at all. We made the discovery only a few hours too late, too. And now she is quite willing to countenance the rumour that I am no more? How unfortunate that I'm ungallant enough to go on living!"

"It strikes me that you don't help matters much by coming over here and playing tag around her shrubbery," suggested the "Cherub."

"Very true. I don't enjoy it, either. I'd much rather be home in Villa Lugano, or spending a holiday in Monaco."

"I might add to that," said the "Cherub," "that it's apt to be a heap safer for you, too. I don't often interfere in family affairs, but I'm going to drop this hint to you now: If you should be found bothering the Countess, I think you'd be damaged some."

"Ah! A knight protector!" and the Count showed his white teeth in an unpleasant smile.

"Cherub" Devine merely shook his head placidly.

"I was thinking of Timmins," said he. "He's the head coachman and general superintendent of the place here, and he

thinks a lot of the Countess. I'm going back now and tell him to keep an eye out for you, and I shouldn't be surprised, if he caught you trying to force yourself on the Countess, to hear that he'd handled you rather rough."

"*Merci!*" murmured the Count, quite undisturbed. "But there's no danger. You may assure the valiant Timmins that I haven't the least intention of seeing the Countess, much less of speaking to her. I had much rather talk to her attorneys."

"Want to see her lawyers, eh? Well, she don't keep them out here in the bushes."

This time the Count indulged in quite a genuine smile.

"My dear Mr. Devine," he protested, "you don't understand the situation. Perhaps if you did, you could be of help to me. Allow me to state, then, that it was not to revive a long dead sentiment which brought me

to America, but a sordid little matter of money. To be definite, there was a marriage settlement; a paltry affair in the shape of a promised yearly income. At first it was paid in full and regularly; then the payments came at irregular intervals and were only partial; of late they have ceased. I am informed by Mr. Hewington that he finds it impossible to continue them. As though I would believe that! So I come here to see for myself if the rich Mr. Hewington has suddenly become a beggar. And this is what I find!"

Count Vecchi shrugged his shoulders, spread out his palms, and indicated the broad expanse of Hewington Acres with a comprehensive nod of the head.

"Think you've got 'em, eh?" asked the "Cherub."

"Such an estate does not suggest poverty to me. Now I am prepared to interview the attorneys of my wife, the Countess."

"Brought all the papers along, I suppose?" queried the "Cherub."

"Papers! There were no papers. But I had Mr. Hewington's word of honour that the income should be paid."

A twinkle of amusement appeared in the blue eyes of Mr. Devine.

"Imagine you can collect on that, do you?" he asked.

"I can make the attempt. It depends, I suppose, on what value Mr. Hewington sets upon his word, and whether or not he is willing to have his pleasant little fiction as to a defunct son-in-law exposed. What do you think?"

It must be conceded that there was a certain quality of engaging frankness in the Count's manner. Quite cheerfully and openly he sought the "Cherub's" advice in this enterprise. Mr. Devine could appreciate audacity. He grinned.

"I think you're a slick article," said he,

"and I should say you *had* got 'em. Looks to me as if Mr. Hewington would either have to chloroform you, or buy you off."

Count Vecchi indulged in a nonchalant shrug.

"I ask only what is justly due. One cannot live without money."

"There's more or less truth in that, Count; only—" and Mr. Devine pursed his cherubic mouth quizzically—"over here we don't make a practice of choking our wives to get it."

"Bah!" The Count waved aside this reference to his brief domestic career. "Over here I shall make my demands through madame's legal representatives."

"You're improving. Going to call on them to-day?"

"As soon as I can get a message to the Countess and learn the names of her attorneys."

"Oh, I see. Now wait—let me think that

over a minute." The "Cherub" rubbed his pink chin thoughtfully. "You say you don't insist upon seeing the Countess personally? All you want is the address of her lawyers?"

The Count nodded.

"Then I'll tell you what we might do," suggested Mr. Devine. "Let's go up and ask Timmins to find out. We can get to his office without being seen. What do you say?"

The Count was quite willing. He offered Mr. Devine a cigarette in his most affable manner, and when the "Cherub" had rescued his straw hat, they started off through the maze of blue-stone walks for the stables. Had the Count fallen in with an old friend he could hardly have been better served. Had he known all about the "Cherub's" deep interest in this affair, no doubt he would have despised him heartily for a weak-backed brother.

Others had made the same mistake, for a cardinal principle in "Cherub" Devine's code was to waste no time or energy in hating those who opposed him. As a matter of fact, he was more apt to cultivate his enemies and to search out their good points, rather than dwell on their obvious faults. He could forgive easily and promptly. Perhaps it was due more to a good digestion than anything else. "Cherub's" smooth brow was unfurrowed by the tracks of hard thoughts, yet he could act when the time came for action.

Evidently he made out his programme as they walked along, for on reaching the office he left the Count outside and went in alone to consult Timmins.

"Ever see a picture of Count Vecchi?" he asked of Timmins.

Yes, Timmins had, but not for a couple of years.

"Take a squint through the window at

the chap outside," said Mr. Devine. "Did the picture look anything like him?"

Timmins peered through the glass and announced that he thought he could see a resemblance.

"Yes, very like him, sir," he went on.

"Then that's him," declared the "Cherub."

The little eyes of Timmins bulged with astonishment.

"Not the one that they said was——"

"Yes; but he says he isn't. Claims he never died at all. Now what do you guess he's here for?"

"Judging by what I've heard, sir, I should say he might be after money."

"Timmins, you're a mind reader. That's just what he is after. He wants to make use of the fact, too, that the Hewingtons have allowed people to think he was dead. It's a hold-up, Timmins."

"Why, the sneaking, unmannerly vil-

lain!" exploded Timmins. "He ought to be put in jail, sir."

"Wouldn't do at all, Timmins. He's supposed to be dead. You can't jail a dead man. And I take it that the Countess wouldn't like to have her husband dug up and exhibited in court."

"She'd expire of mortification, sir."

"Perhaps not as bad as that. But something ought to be done with him. What's that little stone coop without any windows down there by the swan lake?"

"That's the ice house, sir."

"Full up, is it?"

"Oh, no, sir; not now, sir. It's very near empty, I think."

"Room for a cot bed and a chair or so, is there?"

Timmins grinned expressively.

"Plenty of room, sir."

"How about air, Timmins?"

"Excellent ventilation, sir. Has to be, you know."

"Good! Now you slip out the back way and go down there, will you? Go inside and shut the door. When you hear me knock you'll know I've come with a caller. Get the idea, eh?"

"Do I, sir! Oh, my eye! Oh, my eye!" and, with one hand over his mouth, Timmins disappeared.

XVII

THE ice house at Hewington Acres was a most substantial building, far more so than ice houses need to be. That was because it was designed by an architect who knew a lot more about harmony of structure than he did about the ice preserving qualities of stone walls.

In the front were two doors, one at the top, reached by a permanent ladder; the other on a level with the ground. This latter was a double door, with an air space between. The outside half was of thick oak, and swung on heavy strap hinges. In the upper panel was a diamond-shaped design of auger holes.

Standing outside and looking up at these perforations was "Cherub" Devine. He

was not studying the design. He was talking to some unseen person behind the thick door, conversing easily and pleasantly in spite of the handicap. True, he was on the free side of the door. That makes a difference, of course.

But then, Mr. Devine was serene, not because of an absence of anxiety, but in spite of it. As he was quite apt to do, he had acted on an impulse, and it had led him into a perplexing situation. Now he was trying to figure things out and find exactly how matters stood before making his next move.

The change had come abruptly. Half an hour previously he had left the presence of the Countess Vecchi, feeling ridiculously like a small boy who dreams that he is sailing in a crystal boat laden with chocolate cake over a sea of pink lemonade and past islands of vanilla ice cream. That doesn't begin to do justice to the "Cherub's" light-

ness of heart, but perhaps you will understand.

He had held the Countess Vecchi in his arms, he had felt her lips on his, he had heard her falter out an amazingly wonderful confession.

That she had sent him away did not matter—until this wretched Count had bobbed up. Technically, of course, the Count was her husband. Worse than that, he evidently had no notion of retiring. That his motives were mercenary, instead of sentimental, was hardly a comforting thought.

Nor was the Count's personal appearance at all reassuring. When Mr. Devine had thought of the supposed departed husband of the Countess, he had pictured a tall, thin, sallow, bloodless, hollow-eyed wreck, a cold volcano of burnt-out passions. But this frock-coated stranger, whom he had outwitted in the shrubbery, was distinctly not of this sort. Doubtless he was a dissipated

rascal, but he had not yet begun to pay for his sins. He looked good for a long career of wickedness. His eyes were still bright, his cheeks still rounded, and his blood still hot. The Countess must have thought she loved him at one time. Surely he could not have failed to appreciate her loveliness and charm. What if these feelings should be revived?

On the whole, "Cherub" Devine felt a grim satisfaction in knowing that the Count was safe under lock and key, instead of dodging around the grounds, where he might come across the Countess at any moment. Even if there was no danger of a tender reunion, it was best to have the Count shut up, for he was bent on making trouble. At that very moment he was so declaring, to the full extent of his lung power. Through the auger holes he was shouting that Mr. Devine, the Countess, Mr. Hewington and Timmins should all

pay dearly for this high-handed outrage.

"Why not stick to me?" asked the "Cherub." "I did this all on my own hook."

"You're a cursed Yankee pig!" howled the imprisoned Count.

"Sorry you're so stirred up over it," soothingly observed the "Cherub." "Come, let's have no hard feelings. You quiet down and we'll make you as comfortable as possible. Oh, don't kick the door. What's the sense of that?"

"Kidnapper!" shrieked the Count.

"Guilty," responded the "Cherub." "First offence, though. Now for heaven's sake calm down. You can't make any one hear, and they won't let you out, anyway."

In the course of a few minutes this sensible advice had its effect. Besides, the Count was getting hoarse, and he had hurt his toes.

"How long do you mean to keep me locked up in this vile place?" he demanded.

"Wish I knew myself," said the "Cherub" regretfully. "But please don't call it a vile place. It isn't so bad, is it?"

"It's beastly. My shoes are getting full of something."

"Nothing but sawdust," answered the "Cherub." "I'll have Timmins spread a rug or something over it. And we'll put in a nice cot, and a comfortable chair or so, and—"

"You have no right to keep me here a moment," exploded the Count.

"No one disputes that, my dear fellow. I'll agree that it's a perfectly illegal business."

"Then why are you doing it?"

"Now isn't that silly! Didn't you just tell me you came here to make the Hewingtons pay up or be exposed?"

"I was a fool to tell you anything! But

what is it to you? How are you interested, I'd like to know?"

"Now that's where you've got me. I don't like to say just why I'm interested. But I am. And I've got to keep you from bothering the Hewingtons."

"I'll make it hot for you when I get out."

"Sure! And for the Hewingtons, too, I expect?"

"You'll both have to pay for this as soon as I'm free."

"There! you see!" exclaimed the "Cherub" cheerfully. "You'd stir up a bad muss, of course. We could put you in jail for attempted blackmail, but that would bring out that the Countess wasn't a widow, and all that old gossip would be dug up again, and printed in all the papers, and I'd be held up as a kidnapper. No, my dear Count, it wouldn't do at all."

"But you can't keep me here forever," retorted the Count.

"Would be awkward, wouldn't it? But you're supposed to be dead, you know; so it is not so bad. Maybe I can think of something better in the course of a few days. In the meantime, let's make the best of it. Now what can we send you in for supper?"

Considering his position and temperament, the Count behaved quite reasonably. For a foiled villain he did very well. True, he spoke somewhat surlily, and utterly failed to appreciate the delicate humour of the situation when Mr. Devine tried to tempt his appetite by suggesting various favourite dishes of his own, but in the course of a few minutes he had agreed to a fairly substantial menu, and had even gone so far as to name a brand of cigarettes to which he was addicted.

The "Cherub" had wished him a pleasant evening and a good night's rest, and was just turning to go to the stables for the

purpose of leaving the necessary orders with Timmins, when he found himself facing Mr. Hewington. Astonishment was stamped on every line of the old gentleman's aristocratic countenance.

"Why—why, Mr. Devine! You seem to be holding a conversation with some person in there," and he indicated the closed door of the ice house.

"Guess I was," admitted the "Cherub."

"How singular! and—er—might I—er—ask——"

"Suppose you don't," put in the "Cherub." "It would simplify matters a lot if you didn't."

He was a nice, kindly old gentleman, the father of the Countess, but he had rather too much dignity for a comfortable existence. So, at this mild suggestion that he should not meddle, he stiffened, frowned, and began nervously to polish his eye glasses.

"Really, Mr. Devine, it seems to me that I should be informed of any——"

"Well, if you put it that way. But you're apt to be jarred some," warned the "Cherub."

"I have been accustomed, Mr. Devine, to be told of all that went on about this estate, even to the smallest detail. I should like to know, sir, to whom you were talking just now."

"All right," said the "Cherub," with a gesture of resignation. "There's the gentleman's card."

As Mr. Hewington replaced his glasses and read the full name of Count Vecchi, an expression of complete consternation, not to say panic, spread over his features.

"Impossible!" he whispered hoarsely.

"Just what I thought when he sprung it on me," commented the "Cherub." "I told him he was a dead one. He says he isn't. But we can soon settle that. I'll

open the door and let you have a look at him."

"No, no!" hastily protested Mr. Hewington, at the same time backing away. "I—I prefer not to meet him. I—I will take his word for it."

"Then the Count isn't dead, eh?"

Although having a high regard for the exact truth himself, "Cherub" Devine had a broad tolerance for those who for various reasons allowed themselves to juggle with facts. He watched with mild amusement the confusion of mind into which Mr. Hewington was immediately plunged. The old gentleman's face flushed, he fumbled in his pocket for his handkerchief, and made several false starts toward an explanation.

"My dear Mr. Devine," said he at last, taking the "Cherub" by the arm and leading him away from the ice house. "I—er—ah—that is—I hardly know how to—to—"

"Yes, I understand. Why not let it come straight out, though?"

"Certainly, certainly! But, you see, there are many complications."

"Those are generally fatal. Did they kill the Count?"

"No, no! you must not misconstrue my words. I must begin by making the regretful admission that we discovered, soon after my daughter's marriage—indeed, on the very day of the ceremony—that he was a person of dissolute habits."

"Yes, I heard all that the first day I struck here. And then?"

"Then, sir, there was an immediate separation. For a time I continued to supply him with funds, however; but after we left Italy I gradually ceased to do so. About two years ago the Count became so dissipated that it was necessary to confine him in a sanitarium. He disappeared from his old haunts. This gave rise to the ru-

mour that he was dead. It was so reported here. Naturally, the Countess assumed appropriate mourning garb. A few weeks later we learned the falseness of the rumour. The Count was still in the sanitarium, and much benefited by his stay there. But this fact was not made public. Perhaps we should have issued the correction ourselves, but—but— Well, it seemed best not to do so. There was the chance that at any time we might—er—well, that he might—might—”

“ I see,” said the “ Cherub.” “ But, instead of that, he gets well and shows up here. He says he’s come to collect that income you promised him.”

“ The impudent scoundrel!” exclaimed Mr. Hewington, lifting his clenched fists. “ Not a dollar, not a single penny more shall he ever have from me.”

“ That’s the talk! I wouldn’t give up to him, if I were you. But he says if he isn’t

paid he'll bring suit, and advertise the fact that he's still alive."

"The villain!" gasped Mr. Hewington, suddenly losing his colour.

"I had him sized up that way from the start. That's why I chucked him in on the ice."

"On the—the ice, Mr. Devine?"

"Why, sure! I thought he'd cool off quicker in there than anywhere else."

"Ah, I had forgotten! That is the ice house, of course. And he threatens to make public his identity? This is terrible, Mr. Devine. I have told everyone that he was . . . Why, just think! It will be known that I have stooped to—to deception."

"It will look that way, for a fact."

The trembling jaw of De Courcey Hewington grew firm. A gleam of desperation came into the fine old eyes.

"Devine," said he, "this must not be. That man must not be allowed at large."

"Oh, I'll attend to that, all right. You just stay mum and I'll keep him on the ice."

"Will you, will you?" gasped Mr. Hewington gratefully. "Ah, what nobility of soul! I thank you from the bottom of my heart, Mr. Devine. You see, I could hardly accept the responsibility of taking such a step myself, but if you——"

"Yes, I get the idea. You're willing I should do the kidnapping. Well, I'm game. But not a word to the Countess."

"Not a word," promised Mr. Hewington. "And in a month or so I will build another ice house for next summer's use."

"For next summer!" and the "Cherub's" gaze widened as the full significance of this remark became clear to him. "Then you're planning to give the Count a good long term, eh? Well, say, there's nothing slow about you, is there? Whew! Guess I'll have to think that over."

XVIII

ALTHOUGH they had just come to an understanding upon a matter in which both were deeply interested, Mr. Hewington and "Cherub" Devine parted with widely different emotions. Mr. Devine took the path towards the stables, chuckling softly at the odd dilemma in which he found himself. He was in love with a charming young woman whom he had supposed to be a widow. He had just declared his love and learned that it was returned, when a live husband appears on the scene. He promptly locks the husband up. As a last stroke, the highly respectable father of the young woman proposes that the unwelcome husband be kept a prisoner for an indefinite period.

"If ever I needed the help of a slick

lawyer, I guess it's now," mused Mr. Devine. "I'll go to town and look up Bob Driscoll."

Mr. Hewington was not in the habit of chuckling, no matter what the occasion. His mental moods found expression in quite different ways from those of Mr. Devine, as you might expect. When perplexed and agitated, he polished his glasses; quite a dignified and refined manner of giving relief to his feelings. When merely lost in calm thought, he twirled them about his forefinger by the little gold chain to which they were attached. He was doing that now.

For Mr. Hewington's recent panicky condition had abated with the promise of "Cherub" Devine to see that the returned Count was restrained from exposing the fact that he was still alive. Mr. Devine had said that he would attend to the Count, therefore nothing was to be feared. Pre-

cisely why he should have such confidence in the "Cherub's" word, Mr. Hewington did not stop to analyze. He only knew that he felt perfectly sure Mr. Devine would fulfil his promise. From some persons, you know, you do not demand a demonstration of efficiency. The "Cherub" was that sort of person. Was it the audacity of his soul which inspired the confidence of others?

At any rate, Mr. Hewington was content that Count Vecchi was no longer a menacing figure to him and to his daughter. Mr. Devine was seeing to that. Besides, there were more cheerful things to occupy Mr. Hewington's mind. He had learned only a half hour before of some very good news. Hewington Acres was no longer owned, even temporarily, by another. In some way or other the estate had been restored intact to his daughter. He had not grasped the details of this fortunate transaction, but he understood vaguely that young Mr. Wallo-

way had been largely instrumental in clearing up the difficulty. Adèle had mentioned him.

He was an excellent young man, Nicholas Walloway. True, his family was not of pre-colonial origin, but it was well enough established, as families went nowadays. And he was so distinctly superior to such young men as this "Cherub" Devine, who had his good traits, doubtless, but who was so lacking in the finer instincts. He must add to his pamphlet a chapter devoted to this theme, one in which all the crude virtues of men of the Devine stamp should be conceded and accounted for, as well as contrasted with the more refined qualities of the higher type. It might be well to talk the subject over with Adèle.

He could have found no topic better suited to the mood in which he found the Countess that evening. Her brown eyes seemed to glow with a rapt radiance at the

first mention of the "Cherub's" name.

"What absurd notions we did have of him a few days ago!" she observed.

Her father waved his glasses in mild protest.

"No, no, my dear. Our estimate might have been based on slightly exaggerated press reports, but it was far from absurd."

"Then I don't know the meaning of the word, Daddy. When we heard he was coming, didn't we scurry around like a lot of scared hens that have caught sight of a chicken hawk? Didn't we hide up under the roof, and almost hold our breath for two days?"

"We took only reasonable precaution, my dear."

"Against what, Daddy? He didn't become intoxicated, he didn't carouse, he didn't fill the house with sporting characters. You remember how you stormed when you heard about his party?"

"I admit being somewhat concerned upon your account, Adèle. I feared that his guests might be——"

"Yes, I know. I was looking for a crowd of prize fighters and gamblers—and the Walloways came with Bishop Horton! How silly I felt!"

"Mr. Devine does seem to have the knack of making acquaintances in various walks of life. I was astonished. But then, he is a unique character."

"Is that the best you can say of him, Daddy?"

"Oh, I feel kindly enough toward him. He behaved quite inoffensively during his stay here. I was merely trying to express a more exact estimate of him. I might add that he seems to lack the vices of the class that he represents. But he is crude, very crude."

"Is he? In what way?"

"Why, in manners, bearing, speech—

especially in his speech. Now compare him with Nicholas Walloway."

"I have," said the Countess demurely.

"Then there you have it! Now Nicholas is a well born, polished, refined——"

"Blockhead!" broke in the Countess.
"He's wooden all over."

"My dear, my dear!" Mr. Hewington adjusted his glasses and regarded her with amazement. "Nicholas, you must remember, is a gentleman."

"So I have always believed," replied the Countess. "But I don't care; I prefer a live man to a wooden gentleman. And I think 'Cherub' Devine is just splendid! So there!"

Mr. Hewington was shocked and alarmed. He had hoped, now there was no longer necessity for Adèle to propitiate this person, that she would politely but effectually put an end to their brief friendship. In his own tactful way Mr. Hewington stated as much.

"Then you should be thoroughly satisfied," responded the Countess, "for soon after he had given us back our home I sent him away forever."

"What! Forever! No, no, Adèle, that will not do at all. You must not be so abrupt. The fact is that I—er—there is a little matter in which Mr. Devine has undertaken to give me assistance."

"Daddy! You haven't borrowed any money from him, I hope?"

"I? Borrow money of him! Certainly not. It is quite a different affair."

"Haven't we imposed quite enough 'on his generosity, Daddy? Can't you get along without asking new favours of him? He is the soul of good nature, but——"

"There, there, Adèle. I fear you do not know Mr. Devine quite as thoroughly as you think you do. Besides, this is something that he volunteered to do. I am merely allowing him to carry out his own plans,

which happen to coincide with my own wishes. It's a matter about which you understand nothing. Perhaps, if you did, you would not credit Mr. Devine with having such a generous nature."

Mr. Hewington clearly saw that the time had come for him to employ that superior mind of his in the skilful management of a daughter who was at times presumptuous enough to form opinions of her own. And what a shrewd old gentleman he was, to be sure! How well he understood the limitations of feminine mentality!

"For example," he went on, "you have never seen how this paragon of yours can deal with a rival."

"Oh, a competitor in business!" laughed the Countess. "I shouldn't expect him to be generous in business."

"In the instance I had in mind," suavely continued Mr. Hewington, twirling his glasses slowly, "he was not dealing with a

business competitor. I believe I said rival."

" You don't mean a—a—"

" Exactly. A man who stood in his way in what I presume Mr. Devine chooses to regard as an affair of the heart."

" Why—why— I don't understand, Daddy. What man can you possibly mean?" The Countess Vecchi presented a very charming picture of alert perplexity.

" Now, now, my dear! There you go, wanting to be told things which you probably could not understand, and which——"

" But I can. I do. Tell me at once. Was it Nicholas Walloway?"

Mr. Hewington waved his glasses most impatiently.

" Most assuredly not. What a strange conception that Nicholas and Mr. Devine should be rivals in love! No, quite a different person. And what does Mr. Devine do when he meets him and learns his identity? Seizes him forcibly, drags him into

the nearest building, and locks him up without law or license."

"Father, I can't believe such a story. Where did you hear such a preposterous tale?"

"From Mr. Devine himself."

"But how? Where did all this occur?"

"Only this afternoon."

"Since he was here? But you have not been away. Then—then it was here, on our grounds. Do you mean to say that Mr. Devine has some one locked up in one of our buildings?"

Mr. Hewington had meant to say nothing of the sort, but there was no eluding the fact that he had implied as much. Now he could only take refuge behind his dignity.

"That is quite sufficient, my dear. We will not discuss Mr. Devine and his peculiar doings any further, if you please. The subject is one upon which I do not care to dwell just now. I must go to my desk. Good night."

If one only knows how to assume this manner, and has the required strength of character to carry it out, one can manage women folk with ridiculous ease. Observe Mr. Hewington, as he stalks undisturbed to his study. He has deftly overthrown the mistaken notions of his daughter concerning an utterly impossible individual, and followed that up by silencing an imminent outburst of questions.

Yet the Countess Vecchi, as she stood there thoughtfully rolling and unrolling the chain meshes of a silver waist girdle, appeared to be neither crushed nor convinced. Puzzled she undoubtedly was. What to make of this singular series of revelations she did not know. If anything of the kind had happened, it must have been between the time when "Cherub" Devine had left her, after that never-to-be-forgotten parting, and the time when her father had appeared for dinner.

And during that period the "Cherub" had met a rival? A rival for whose hand? Not hers. Then— But pshaw! She would not entertain such an unworthy thought. No one could doubt the "Cherub's" sincerity; that is, no one who had looked into his blue eyes, as she had gazed into them; no one who had heard him falter out the words which he had whispered in her ear. Did she not know him thoroughly? Did she not— Ah, but could she say that?

It is hardly fair, though, to speculate as to the innermost thoughts of the Countess Vecchi at that trying moment. We know that she was rather a nice young woman, very good to look at, and more or less entertaining as a companion. Suppose she did narrow her eyelids and bite to a riper redness her gracefully curved under lip? We may even admit that she crushed the meshes of the silver girdle until there were red marks on her white palm. She was no

pallid compendium of all the feminine virtues. She was a young person of high spirits and ready passions. And she could not wholly forget those stories about La Belle Savoie and the dinner to chorus girls.

However, she did nothing more to betray that her emotions were other than those of perplexity and curiosity. Throwing a lace affair over her head and shoulders, she slipped quietly out through the big entrance hall to the wide veranda and down one of the paths leading toward the Sound. It was after eight o'clock, and quite dark, as the old moon was now rising late, but she knew exactly where she was going.

A short distance from the house was a little knoll, on which was perched a vine-covered rustic summer house. Gaining this, she paused for a look about her. In one direction was the Sound, indicated here and there by the faint lights of distant steamers. To the right she could make out the

stables, and in the middle distance the gardener's cottage and other buildings. There, if anywhere—unless in the big house itself, which was improbable—could a man be kept prisoner. Which one of those black buildings, she wondered, was being used as a dungeon? The absurdity of the unspoken query almost made her smile as she framed it.

Yet even as she looked, she saw something which made her lean forward and strain her eyes with intent interest. From one of the smallest buildings, a low stone structure which she judged must be the ice house, issued a cheery beam of light. Some one was standing in the half-opened doorway. Only for an instant did this spectacle remain visible. Then the door was shut with a bang and the yellow ray disappeared. A moment later the Countess thought she could distinguish a man making his way across the lawn towards the servants' wing of the house.

Now all this seemed very singular to the Countess Vecchi. Under ordinary circumstances, perhaps, she would merely have wondered a little and waited until morning to ask why a light was kept in the ice house. But her curiosity had already been aroused, and she was bent on finding out all she could at once.

So, keeping the figure of the man in sight, she began to walk parallel with him, in order to see where he was going. When she saw he was making directly for the side door of the south wing, she grasped her skirts firmly and started to run. Perhaps it was not a skilful performance from a sprinter's standpoint, but it was done gracefully and effectively, for the Countess Vecchi was waiting behind the woodbine trellis when the man who had come from the ice house stepped into the square of light which poured out through the kitchen window onto the gravel path.

"Why, Timmins! Is it you?"

Obviously it was. On one hand he balanced a tray, in the other he carried a formidable looking club. He seemed fully as surprised to see the Countess as she was in discovering him.

"Lor', Miss, what a start you gave me!" said he.

"Did I? I'm sure I didn't intend to frighten you, Timmins. But I saw you coming, and there was something I wanted to ask you."

"Yes, Miss; right away, Miss." Timmins had long ago given up trying to address the Countess in any other manner. "Just as quick as I gets these things inside, Miss."

"What is it you have there, Timmins?"

"Why, Miss, I've been a-givin' the puppies their supper. Ain't they the clever little nippers, though! You ought to see the way they carries on when——"

"Yes, I know. But I thought you usually carried their food in a pail. What have they had to-night?" And before Timmins could protest she had lifted the linen cover which had been thrown over the tray. A variety of dishes stood revealed.

"Why, Timmins! Surely the coach puppies do not eat French chops?"

You must picture for yourself the look which for a moment played over the sharp features of the luckless Timmins. But it lasted no longer. He was ready witted, was Timmins.

"Lor', no, Miss. Not as a general thing. But this is a special occasion, you know; a very particular occasion, Miss."

"Indeed! And what very particular special occasion might this be to call for French chops?"

"Why, don't you remember? Four months ago to-night? Course, it's a bit of foolishness, but Mrs. Timmins would have

it that way. ‘Puppies ’as birthdays,’ says she, ‘just the same——’”

“But puppies don’t eat baked potatoes, even on birthday anniversaries; do they, Timmins?”

Like most of his class, Timmins, when once fairly started, could lie easily and readily. He seemed to gather inspiration as he went along, and when in full swing the impetus of his momentum carried him over obstacles which would have brought him to a standstill if encountered earlier. And now he was almost in the fine frenzy of creative statement.

“Baked potatoes! Do they? Why, Miss, they just loves ’em, so they do.”

“And peas, and bread and butter, and jam, Timmins?”

“It’s a bit wonderful, Miss, but them puppies has the most educated appetites of any coach puppies I ever see.”

“So I should judge,” commented the

Countess, still eyeing the tray. "But there's one thing I can't account for still. How many puppies are there, Timmins?"

"Six of 'em, Miss."

"And only one of them drinks tea?" The Countess was pointing significantly at a single tea-cup, the spoon still resting in the saucer.

The carefully controlled muscles of Timmins's fox-like features relaxed into a convulsive grimace of dismay, and then resumed their normal acuteness. Timmins forced a rasping little laugh.

"Oh, my eye, Miss; but that's a rare good un, that is! Tea for the puppies! Oh, oh! That's for me, Miss. I sometimes drinks it whilst they're eatin' their suppers, just to be sociable like."

No doubt the Countess should have resented each barefaced deception. She did make a weak attempt at a frown, but it turned into a smile, and then a rippling

laugh, in which Timmins joined genuinely.

"I'm afraid, Timmins, that you're spoiling those puppies. The last time I saw them, though, they were in the stable, and just now you came from the ice house, didn't you? You aren't keeping them there now, are you?"

"There's only one in the ice house, Miss."

"Just one! Isn't he lonesome?"

"Naturally, Miss, naturally. But I'll tell you how it was. You see——"

"Never mind, Timmins. I've no doubt you could explain it all very thoroughly. But suppose you save it for another time," and the Countess Vecchi tripped off into the darkness toward the front door.

She had heard and seen enough to convince her that at least part of what she had gathered from her father's intimations was correct. Some one was being kept as a prisoner about the place. That some one was shut up in the ice house. Who he was, why

he was there, and what part, if any, "Cherub" Devine had taken in the incarceration, she meant to find out just as soon as possible. It was useless to ask questions. Her father would refuse to answer, and the replies of Timmins were too inventive to be convincing.

So, early the next morning, before any one else on Hewington Acres had even roused and turned over for a sunrise nap, the Countess Vecchi stole quietly downstairs, let herself out of the front windows, and walked determinedly in the direction of the ice house.

XIX

MEANWHILE "Cherub" Devine had acted with his usual directness. Having left minute instructions relative to the safe keeping and comfort of Count Vecchi, he had hurried back to town and sought out that distinguished champion of the rights and privileges of such corporations as can afford to pay liberal fees, Mr. Robert Jaynes Driscoll.

Your average client would not have attempted to find Mr. Driscoll at that hour in the evening; or, having found him, would hardly have expected him to give legal advice out of business hours. But "Cherub" Devine never stopped to inquire whether or not he was violating professional ethics or intruding on personal privacy. He knew that Bob Driscoll would most likely be

found either at his club or at home. Five minutes in a telephone booth settled the question. Mr. Driscoll was at home. He would be glad to see "Cherub."

Mr. Devine hailed a taxicab, and within half an hour was being shown into a back room whose walls were lined from floor to ceiling with thick books bound in calfskin. Behind a flat-topped desk in the middle of the room, minus coat, waistcoat and collar, and wearing a green eyeshade, was a boyish-faced man who might have been taken to be still in his twenties were it not for the pepper and salt mixture in his dark hair. The contents of several fat indexing envelopes were spread out before him.

"Whew!" exclaimed the "Cherub." "Guess someone'll have to settle a bill for overtime."

Mr. Driscoll smiled, tossed the eyeshade on the desk, and waved Mr. Devine towards a chair.

"Do much of this night work?" asked the "Cherub." "Have to, I suppose, to keep things running?"

Again Mr. Driscoll smiled. He was quite used to Mr. Devine's breezy manner. Also he could not but admire the accuracy with which the "Cherub" had estimated the situation. Not that Mr. Driscoll really needed to spend his evenings at the desk, but it helped. He had just been sending out a few personal checks. He had a wife and daughter who were shopping in Paris, a son who was touring New England in an automobile, and an invalid sister who was taking baths and other things at Hot Springs. Mr. Driscoll did not mention these details. He merely asked of Mr. Devine what was up.

"All kinds of things," responded the "Cherub," dropping into a red leather chair and extracting one of his black cigars from a waistcoat pocket. "Give me the matches,

will you, Bob?" Mr. Driscoll waited, a look of amused indulgence on his face, until Mr. Devine was thoroughly prepared for comfortable speech. That great lawyer was one of those men who waste few words in trivial discourse. It always seemed as if he was trying to live up to his reputation of charging \$10 per word for everything he said. Mr. Devine knew better, for he practised the same economy of speech.

"Firstly," began the "Cherub," "you're the chief attorney for that blasted railroad I've just loaded up with, aren't you?"

Mr. Driscoll nodded.

"Good! Now, as my private counsel, I'd like to have you tell me if I can safely get rid of being president of it within the next twenty-four hours?"

"Not tired of it so soon, are you?"

"Tired! Why, say, Bob, there isn't work enough about a job of that kind to keep a man awake. I put in all one day trying to

find things to do. By ten o'clock I'd O.K.'d a basketful of general orders that I didn't know anything about, fired three fluffy-haired typewriter girls, and issued a dozen annual passes to my friends. Then my private secretary and I sat around and looked at each other until luncheon time. I didn't show up again. No, no, Bob! It may be highly respectable and all that, but I've got to be where there's something doing. I want to get back into the street."

"There's nothing to prevent you from resigning."

"Except putting in some one that'll work things the way I want 'em worked. Now our Philadelphia friend that we dumped out the other day won't do. He's got too many white whiskers and he's too stiff-necked. What do you say to old Rimmer?"

"Rimmer, of Chicago?"

"Yep! The one we nipped on short holdings. Now, he hates me as the devil

hates holy water; but he's a hustler, and he knows the railroad game like a book. He's down and out now, but he won't stay down, and when he gets up again I'd rather have him on my side than against me. Guess he'd rather be with me, too. How about Rimmer, eh?"

Mr. Driscoll sent a quick but appreciative glance at the "Cherub." He endorsed the Rimmer nomination.

"Then that's settled," observed the "Cherub"; "you send for him in the morning and put it up to him. I figure that he'll be mighty glad to crawl on the band wagon. Now for item No. 2. Bet a million you ceuldn't guess what I've been doing."

"Stake too high," laughed Mr. Driscoll, "but I think I could come near guessing. You've been getting married."

"Z—z—z—ing! but that was close—I don't think," replied the "Cherub."

"You're within gunshot, though, Bob. And I expect I might as well own up that I'd like to, but there's no hope. I found the right girl, all right; and I'd just told her about it, when who should show up but a hubby."

"Not hers?"

"Right! I thought all along she was a widow. Everyone thinks so. He's one of these cheap macaroni Counts, regular wife-beater, and their honeymoon didn't last more than a few hours. She leaves him in Italy and comes home. Then it's reported that he has died in a sanitarium—family don't deny it, girl puts on black, and all hands hope it will soon be so. But he refuses to die and comes over here to hold them up for cash. As it happens, the first person he runs across is me. Now what do you suppose I did to him?"

Mr. Driscoll's eyes concentrated seriously on the bland face of "Cherub" Devine.

"I hope—" he began.

"Oh, I didn't hurt him," interrupted the "Cherub." "I'm no hot head—never struck a man in my life—wouldn't know how. But perhaps I did worse. I decoyed him to an ice house and locked him in there."

"You what!" Even the composure of Bob Driscoll was stirred by this unique confession.

"Sounds like a college boy stunt, or a Black Hand outrage, don't it? But it was the only thing I could think of at the time. Something had to be done right away. There he was, hanging around the house and laying his plans to bleed the family for as much as he could scare out of them. So I just jollied him along to the ice house, tolled him inside, and shut the door on him."

"You say his claim is——"

"A clear game of blackmail. Her father promised to pay an annuity. He can't. Hasn't got a dollar. About all the girl has is her home. They've been separated for

over two years. Could he collect anything on that?"

"Not in our courts. So you locked him up, did you? Why didn't you let him make his demand, and then have him arrested on a charge of blackmail?"

"Couldn't. That would bring out the whole story. See? She's been posing as a widow. That's her father's work. Think of what the papers would make of that. No, no! We don't want to go into court, and the Count mustn't. Just now he's safe in the ice house; safe and comfortable, but hot under the collar. Calls me a kidnapper. Is there anything in that?"

Mr. Driscoll made a brief mental review of the case before answering.

"I'm afraid, Cherub, that he's right. That would be the technical charge. It's rather a serious offence, too—felony, you know."

"All right, I'm not squeamish. Look up

some good criminal lawyer, will you, and have him let me know how far I can go."

"M—m—m—m—" murmured Mr. Driscoll through pursed lips. "Why not soothe him with a few hundred dollar bills and let him out?"

"That's where my fool pride comes in, Bob. Didn't know I had any, but I guess I have. See here; I can't buy off the husband of the girl I—well, it don't seem right. That would stick in my crop."

"But you can't imprison a man indefinitely on your own hook, Cherub. Why, man, you would run the risk of a long term of imprisonment!"

"I suspected that. Well, I can stand it if he can. And he gets his dose first."

Mr. Driscoll looked long and earnestly at the "Cherub." At last he suggested: "You must be very fond of the young woman, Devine."

"That's putting it mildly, Bob, and she's

worth it, too. Why, say, she's the finest, sweetest, cutest— But there! I've got no right to talk like that. It's all off. There's that infernal Count."

"Why hasn't she divorced him?"

"Against her principles. I like her all the better for it, too. Oh, she's the genuine article, Bob. And I've got to give her up. Honest, it's tough."

For a sudden moment or so despair tried to dim the cheerful gleam of "Cherub" Devine's blue eyes. Then, with a shake of his shoulder, he threw it off.

"But this isn't getting on, Bob. If I'm going to have dealings with this Count Vecchi, I want to know who he is and all about him. Might stir up something that would be useful, you know."

"Good idea," commented Mr. Driscoll.

"It's the way I like to do business. Now what connections have you with any private information bureau on the Continent?"

"There's Deufstetters, in Vienna."

"Slower than creeping paralysis! We'd get a report in about six months. No, we'll try Jimmy McQuade. Used to be one of the *Record-Herald* boys, in Chicago. Now he's at the head of a newspaper syndicate in Paris. He's got columns of stuff out of me. And he's the kind that will get a move on. I'll cable him to-night to look up this Count of mine and wire back full details. Eh? So long, Bob. I'll drop in at your office about noon to-morrow."

Before midnight Mr. Devine had thought of other things to do, and he had done them. So by morning the results of his activities had spread, as ripples on a pond when an exuberant black bass comes out after an appetizing fly. From a downtown detective agency four men were starting out to guard the exits to Hewington Acres, with orders to stop and hold a slim young man wearing a frock coat and a silk hat, should he at-

tempt to leave the grounds. In Paris Jimmy McQuade was preparing to catch the Orient express for Northern Italy. The most skilful criminal lawyer in New York had been summoned by telephone to a consultation with Mr. Driscoll, and Mr. Nicholas Walloway was to find on his desk a code letter of instructions covering a new and wholly audacious stock deal which would make things hum on the floor of the Stock Exchange a few hours later. "Cherub" Devine was again in his familiar element, outwardly a still placid "Cherub," but with a hint of sternness in the smooth outlines of his closely shaven jaw.

XX

WHAT would have been the emotions of "Cherub" Devine could he have known that the Countess Vecchi had risen before the sun was fairly up, for the purpose of interviewing his prisoner?

Perhaps you have been astir at that initial hour of day? Oh, such things occur in the lives of the soundest sleepers among us. But if you haven't, at least you have read the effusions of poets and descriptive writers—all about the crystal air, and the dew-covered grass, and the opening flowers. Take my word for it, it's all so, especially about the dew. And allow me to record the fact that the Countess wore rubbers.

Had she been a romantically minded young person, we should have been obliged to picture her in a trailing white gown and

dainty slippers, probably with paper soles, and we should have wondered how long it was before she had the snuffles in her pretty nose. But, thank goodness, she was not romantically inclined. What bores they are, those loppy young women, who gush about impossible things, and seem always to be posing for the benefit of someone or other. Do you know what becomes of them? No, they do not marry the broad-shouldered heroes. Generally they don't marry at all, but grow into family afflictions in the form of headachey maiden aunts, or reform and get to be really useful school teachers, according to the fortunes of their relatives.

It is the well-balanced, practical young women of sound sense and high spirit who sometimes fly off on a tangent and do the really romantic things. For instance, take the Countess Vecchi. Here she was, at this unusual hour and entirely alone, standing before the padlocked door of the ice house,

bent on finding out who was shut up there, and why. Your loppy young woman might dream of adventures far more thrilling, but she would take it out in dreaming. Would she have the courage to investigate a real mystery, such as this?

The Countess Vecchi was beginning to wish that she hadn't come, after all. Who could say what sort of prisoner she might be on the point of rousing? A man who was "Cherub" Devine's rival for some woman's affections, so her father had as good as said. But she could not believe that now. Perhaps for a moment after she had heard it the thing seemed possible, but since then she had thought the matter out, and her faith in the "Cherub" had renewed itself. No, no! He was too genuine to be guilty of such double dealing. Had he not gone straight from her, in that one wild moment of yielding madness, to his encounter with this unknown person?

There might be a dozen other reasons which had led the "Cherub" to lock somebody up—only she could think of none at the time. But he must have had good cause. Perhaps the man was a criminal, or a dangerous lunatic? The Countess shrank away from the padlocked door and glanced anxiously about. It might have been wiser to have waited until later, and then insisted upon Timmins coming with her.

But no, she felt that she wanted no witnesses to this interview. Suppose her father's version should be correct? The Countess lifted a determined chin and stepped briskly up to the heavy door. Smartly she rapped on the oaken panel—and immediately pressed her tingling knuckles to her lips. Breathlessly she waited for a response from within. Had it come in the shape of angry roars, accompanied by a rattling of chains, she would hardly have been surprised. The least she

expected was a growl. But nothing of the sort did she hear. No sound at all came from behind the thick door.

Next the Countess doubled up one fist and tried to make a noise by hammering the wood. This was a failure, too. Then she looked around for a small stone, found it, wrapped her handkerchief about one end, and proceeded to evoke a series of loud thumps. This proved effective, for an instant later she heard a creaking, as of wire springs, and a sleep-laden voice murmured some indistinct reply.

“Hello, hello!” called the Countess, rapping again with the stone.

“Eh? What? What’s the matter?” came in thick, wheezy tones.

“Please get up. Come closer to the door, will you?”

More and livelier creakings followed, and then a querulous response.

“Go away. I don’t want my breakfast

now. I—I—" then came a prolonged yawn. "I can't eat breakfast anyway. I've got a beastly cold in my head. Go away, I tell you."

"I haven't brought you breakfast," said the Countess, a little impatiently. "I just want to know why you are in our ice house. That's all. What are you doing in there, anyway?"

Evidently this was sufficient to bring the unknown to his feet, for there ensued a rather violent disturbance of what was obviously a wire strung cot bed, and then the voice was heard more distinctly, but still with muffled thickness.

"What—why— Well, I like that! What am I doing in your ice house, eh? Do you suppose I—I—a-a-at-choo-o-o-o! A-a-a-atchoo-o-o-o! There, blast it! Do you imagine I would lock myself in such a hole from choice? Say, who the deuce are you out there, anyway?"

"Never mind who I am," retorted the Countess. "I'm very sorry you've caught cold. Indeed I am. But please tell me who you are?"

"Oh, ho! So that's it, eh? Well, you wait a minute, will you, until I—I—" but another sneezing fit interrupted this sentence. When it was over the Countess heard him moving something against the door and was soon conscious that someone was gazing at her through the auger holes. She thought she could distinguish a smothered exclamation of surprise.

"Well?" she observed. "Can you see now?"

"Oh, yes; quite well, thank you."

"But you don't know any more about who I am than before, do you?"

"Don't I, though?" and the unknown chuckled. "You're the Countess Vecchi."

"Humph!" said the Countess. "That's a mere guess."

"Is it? Then I dare you to deny that you aren't. Come! Am I not right, my dear Adèle?"

The Countess started and tossed her head angrily.

"It doesn't matter in the least about my name. I asked for yours."

"And if I gave it—what then?"

"Why—why, I'll know who you are," and the Countess could not repress a little smile.

"Really! How perfectly simple! But it suits me better not to give it."

"Then perhaps you will tell me why you are in there?"

"Oh, certainly. There's no mystery about that. The door is locked on the outside."

"But who did it?"

"A stout, pink-faced person who is widely known, I believe, as 'Cherub' Devine."

"Ah!" The Countess did not mean to

allow this exclamation to be audible, but it was.

"So he hasn't told you about it yet, eh?" commented the unseen prisoner. "Stupid of me, wasn't it, to allow him to trick me so easily? But I didn't know all that I know now. You wait! Your Mr. Devine is going to regret that he was so clever."

"But why did he do it?"

"Why not ask Mr. Devine?"

"Of course," said the Countess, "if it's something you are ashamed to——"

"Now that's very subtle of you, very. But I'm not ashamed. I'd just as soon tell you as not. You might have guessed anyway. There's a lady in the case."

"A—a lady!" gasped the Countess. "Some one that—that Mr. Devine——"

"Exactly. I found out only recently."

The arched lips of the Countess Vecchi were pressed tightly together, her chin was held very firmly; although she could see

nothing but the auger holes in the thick door, she stared hard at them.

"And you—" she went on, after a pause, "you are interested in her also?"

"Naturally," came the rejoinder.

"But why should Mr. Devine wish to—"

"I'll explain all that. When he found that I happened to be the lady's husband, he decoyed me here and locked me up."

"Oh, oh! Her husband! I don't believe a word of it, not a word! It—it's a mistake, all a mistake."

"Really?" The prisoner seemed to find something entertaining in her apparent agitation, for there was a hint of amused tolerance in his tone. "Where does the mistake come in? I'm shut up here fast enough, am I not? No mistake about that, is there?"

"No, no," admitted the Countess. "But about the—about your wife, you know. Why should you think that Mr. Devine

cares enough for her to—to be so unjust to you as this?"

"Only because he as good as told me so himself. You see, my wife and I have been living apart. He thought I was dead. When I appear, he finds me in the way. So he locks me up. But if there's any mistake I wish you'd point it out to Mr. Devine. Think there is, eh?"

"Oh, I don't know what to think."

To be sure it would have been much finer and nobler if the Countess Vecchi had held to her faith in "Cherub" Devine, if she had denied this implication of fickleness with scornful lip and flashing eye. That would have been the approved manner. But why pretend? We know her too well for that. It is more than likely that, if the eyes of the Countess flashed at all, the flashes had a greenish hue; and we wouldn't be too positive that, if "Cherub" Devine had been within reaching distance of her firm white

hands at this particular moment, he wouldn't have had his ears boxed.

However, she found nothing more to do than wring her hands and declare over and over that she did not know what to think. And why shouldn't she have been in doubt? Here was corroboration in detail of her father's unwillingly told story. And here was the prisoner in the ice house. She wanted most to run back home, lock herself in her room, and bang things around a bit before the tears came. She knew they would come, and soon, for the Hewingtons almost always cried most when very angry. There was one old Continental Hewington who, so the story runs, wept and cursed all through the battle of Monmouth Plains, when a Hessian officer had stirred his fighting blood by an awkward jab with a sword point.

The Countess Vecchi was determined to hold back the tears, though, until she had

put a few more questions. They were the ones she had been longing to ask from the first.

"This—this other—No, I mean this lady of whom you speak; is she young?"

"Just twenty-three."

"My own age," thought the Countess. Then she added aloud: "And she is quite pretty, I suppose?"

"Oh, she's pretty enough. But it's chiefly her cute ways which make her fascinating to men."

"Oh!" The Countess caught her breath sharply. "Then she is fascinating? Is she a blond?"

"Not a bit—lovely dark hair, big dark eyes. Her eyes are her strong point."

"Oh, I see!" commented the Countess. Then, to herself, "It's because I look something like her. And she's young and fascinating. Humph!"

"Glad I could tell you about her," ob-

served the prisoner, "but if you don't mind, I think I'll climb down off of this cot. It's rather rickety, and I feel another sneezing fit coming on. Was there anything more?"

There was much art in this assumption of meekness. It aroused the Countess Vecchi to an instant realization of her own selfishness. Here she was, forgetting the injustice which had been done to this stranger. He was being held by "Cherub" Devine, a prisoner, and in the Hewington ice house.

"I beg your pardon," she said earnestly. "Yes, there is something more. Listen. You must go away from here at once."

"Nothing would please me better, but I can't crawl through these holes."

"I know, and I haven't a key to the padlock. But I shall get one. If I can't get the key, I shall demand that you be set at liberty. I'll go to my father, to Mr. Devine, and——"

"Oh, I wouldn't bother them about it. Just you say nothing at all, but find the key, undo the lock, and then slip away. Perhaps you'd better wait until afternoon. Then they'll all be surprised and wonder how I did it. Eh? Wouldn't it be better to do it that way?"

"But it's such a shame, keeping you shut up here like a criminal."

"That's so. I told them it was an outrage. And I've caught a frightful cold, too. But it isn't so bad in the daytime. I can sleep most of the time, and it will be a lot more fun to give them the slip when they're not suspecting. Much better than raising a row about it, and letting all the servants know. Think you can find the key, don't you?"

"I'm sure I can. I'll send Timmins on an errand and look in his desk. It's certain to be there. This afternoon, then?"

"Any time after luncheon will do. And

say, I'm greatly obliged, you know. You're a trump. It's mighty good of you."

"It isn't at all. I couldn't do less, and if I ever speak to Mr. Devine again, it will be only to tell him what I think of such cruel treatment. Good-bye. I'm going now."

"Good-bye — and good luck," came faintly through the air-holes in the door.

Perhaps it was best that the Countess could not see the grimace of satisfaction which accompanied the words. Her frame of mind was none too angelic as it was. She had decided, however, to postpone any outburst of feeling, either by violent handling of the furniture or by weeping. First of all, she meant to get the key to that padlock on the ice-house door.

XXI

THUS it happened something after this fashion: the time was late afternoon, between five and six o'clock, when the golden autumn day was about to end in a blaze of sapphire light that was soon to fade into an empty arch of turquoise blue. The invalid aunt had been wrapped in steamer rugs by the nurse, put in her wheeled chair, and rolled out on an upper veranda, where she could watch the sun drop down towards the distant Connecticut hills across the Sound. The Countess Vecchi was reading to her, a thrilling story of Alaskan adventure—one of the creepy, blood-thrilling kind in which men starve to death most horribly, or else indulge in unique homicide for the sake of weirdly beautiful heroines, who wear fur trousers and sit in the snow. The invalid

aunt, who was really a gentle old soul, demanded such strong literary refreshment, and would accept none other.

Down in the garden old Mr. Hewington, with his hands clasped in sedate manner behind his back, poked musingly about the paths among the asters and dahlias. What he was mooning about doesn't matter. He presented a very calm and dignified appearance, and added just the right human touch to the picture. At least, Eppings thought so, as he caught a glimpse of him from one of the front windows, where he was furling the awning.

Eppings remembered having seen old Lord Devonfield walk about in much the same calm and aristocratic manner when he, Eppings, had been only a second man at Cottley Castle. And Eppings sighed contentedly, for it was well understood in the servants' wing that the brief but disturbing reign of that Devine person was over.

Twice he had impudently offered his hand and fortune to the Countess Vecchi, and twice he had been scornfully refused. The parlour maid knew all the details. She had rehearsed the scene for the assembled "help"; and the only one who had doubted scoffingly had been Timmins.

Just now Timmins appeared up the left carriage-drive. He was on foot and leading a half-grown Jersey calf. He had been sent to purchase the calf from the Wilbur-Tremway's head dairyman. The Countess Vecchi had sent him. Not that she greatly desired a Jersey calf. In fact, she had no clear idea what they would do with it, but Timmins had long ago suggested that there should be more live-stock about the place, and recently he had mentioned this particular calf.

So Timmins, as he led his purchase home, was experiencing that calm satisfaction of one who has carried the day. Somehow the

calf was calm, too, though just why, it would be hard to say. Such animals do have their restful moments, however. At any rate, the calf and Timmins, strolling leisurely up the drive, Mr. Hewington mooning about the garden, Eppings in the window, the Countess and her invalid aunt on the upper veranda, all seemed to be in perfect harmony with the placid stillness of the hour and the scene. And you know how quietly a late September day may end, with an absolutely cloudless sky, with not a breath to stir the tree tops, and hardly a bird to break the silence with its nesting call. It seemed as though restless Nature, having rounded out a perfect day, stopped to watch with breathless care its perfect close.

And at that precise moment the ice-house door swung gently outward on its hinges, while a man, wearing a wrinkled frock coat and a silk hat whose lustre was somewhat dimmed by a drapery of cobwebs, stepped

cautiously out. He closed the door behind him, picked up a padlock from the ground, snapped it through the staple, and smiled. Next he glanced in the direction of the house.

Above the shrubbery he could see only the roof and the dormer windows of the upper story, but apparently he was satisfied. Then he turned and looked towards the stables. No one was in sight there, but the man in the silk hat shook his fist at the sunset-red-denied windows.

Had he cast a glance directly behind him, he would have seen Timmins and the calf just coming into view over the crest of a little rise in the rolling driveway. But he cast no such glance. Evidently he knew of only one exit from Hewington Acres, the right gateway, by which he had entered, and he at once struck a business-like gait in making for it.

The discreet Timmins was both startled

and puzzled. He did not wish to shout and alarm the folks in the house, for that would reveal the secret of the prisoner. Neither did he wish to release the calf. Yet he could not stand there and watch the man escape. That would never do. What would "Cherub" Devine say? And what would become of the generous gratuity of which Mr. Devine had hinted when he impressed upon Timmins the necessity of keeping a close watch on the occupant of the ice house?

Timmins's sharp little eyes narrowed menacingly. With the free end of the rope he gave the Jersey calf a smart whack on the ribs, rudely rousing it from its peaceful promenade. The calf jumped ahead. So did Timmins. Yanking and whacking, running and leaping, the pair of them careered impetuously across the velvety lawn, crashing through shrubbery, dodging between trees, and making a straight course for the right-hand driveway.

Let us not pause to consider the surprised indignation of the calf. We have all we can manage to picture the consternation of the escaping prisoner when he saw himself headed off by this incongruous tandem. No doubt he instantly recognized Timmins as his jailor, for, after a moment's astonished hesitation, he doubled on his tracks, evidently meaning to make a wide circuit of the house.

But Timmins was losing no advantage, however small. The instant his quarry halted, he charged headlong at him, waving his free hand as a signal for the man to surrender. When the person in the silk hat took no notice of this invitation, but ran towards the Sound, Timmins followed joyfully. If he could run him out on Hewington Point, he would have him trapped.

In spite of his lack of knowledge of the geography of the grounds, the fleeing prisoner was not to be caught so easily. He had

his wits about him, his eyes open, and he was a fairly good runner. Perhaps he caught a glimpse of the water between the trees, for he soon veered to the right and dashed down one of the garden paths. So the placid meditations of Mr. Hewington were interrupted by the noise of rapidly approaching footsteps. The next moment he had a glimpse of an individual in a frock coat, who was sprinting towards him at top speed. Also he was conscious that Timmins was shouting to him from beyond: "Hi, governor! Stop 'im! Stop 'im!"

Involuntarily Mr. Hewington raised his arms and stepped directly into the middle of the path. That was quite sufficient. The runner dug his heels into the gravel, checked his flight long enough for one dazed look, and promptly dashed into a clump of golden glow, reappearing to the view of Timmins a second later headed towards the house. Evidently the man was bewildered,

or else he would not have failed to observe the by no means inconspicuous figure of Mrs. Timmins looming large in the kitchen door.

"Stop 'im, Maggie! Stop 'im!" shouted Timmins, abandoning all secrecy now.

Mrs. Timmins was not one to wait for explanations at such a time. Timmins wanted somebody stopped, and stopped he should be. With surprising agility she got her huge bulk in motion and moved imposingly and at right angles upon the refugee. As she did this, Timmins, dragging the calf and followed by Mr. Hewington, closed in on the other side. But the bossie was tired of the game, or else he was winded. He no longer bounded merrily upon his wobbly legs, now ahead, now just behind Timmins. He stuck his forefeet straight out and sawed balkily at the lead rope.

This left a gap of some ten yards in the line of offence, and through it the hunted

man bolted bravely, the tails of his frock coat fluttering a taunting salute as he spurted towards freedom. The sedate Eppings was just in time to view the escape with open mouth and staring eyes.

"Tyke after 'im, you blooming chump!" screamed the disgusted Timmins. "W'y don't you tyke after 'im?"

Thus exhorted, the butler did break into a stiff trot, which was so patently ineffective that Timmins might have laughed had the occasion been less serious. As it was, he only gasped out an exclamation of disapproval, threw the calf's lead rope to Mr. Hewington, with the suggestion: "Here, you 'old 'im, governor," and darted after his prisoner.

Do you wonder, then, at the amazement of the Countess Vecchi when into the calm of the sunset hour burst this animated procession? First a man swinging a silk hat

in his right hand, and panting as he ran. Next Timmins, his elbows close to his sides and his jaw thrust out in approved Marathon style. Third Mrs. Timmins, very red of face, and her ample chest billowing up and down like a stormy sea, but getting over the ground quite rapidly. Fourth Eppings, his solemn eyes almost popping out of his head. And at the rear, her father, vainly trying to urge the reluctant calf into a livelier gait.

"What is it? What's the matter?" called down the Countess Vecchi, dropping her book and springing to her feet.

But there was hardly breath enough left in the whole procession to have answered her, and each one was much too busy to try. Only Eppings lifted his solemn face, now of a splendid purple shade, long enough to throw her an apologetic look, suggesting how embarrassed he felt at being discovered indulging in such unprofessional ex-

ercise, and then on he pounded with all the grace of a jumping-jack.

"Oh, oh, something dreadful must have happened!" exclaimed the Countess. "And there's father being chased by a— No, he's pulling it along with him. It's a calf! Father, father! What *is* the matter?"

The invalid aunt, with her back to the scene and her eyes half closed, listened with keen appreciation.

"Go on, Adèle. Don't stop so often. I don't quite get the connection, but this is a most interesting chapter. What comes next?"

"Nonsense, Auntie! I wasn't reading then. Something is happening, right here under our noses. There's a man! He's running away, and everyone is chasing him. Oh, I must find out what's the matter," and away went the Countess, through the upper hall and down the stairs.

"Gracious!" panted the invalid aunt, and promptly went off into a faint.

Meanwhile the race between Timmins and his elusive prisoner was progressing very prettily. They were keeping to the driveway now, and the smooth macadam offered fine footing. It could be seen that Timmins was slowly gaining, but it still remained to be proven whether or not he had the requisite staying qualities to win out in a long, stern chase. Obviously the stranger would clear the gates before he could be overhauled. No doubt he realized this himself, and perhaps it inspired that final burst of speed which he was making, when there came to the ears of all concerned the sharp, imperious honk-honk of an automobile horn.

The next instant a big red car whirled in through the gates, and at sight of the advancing procession in the roadway, was brought to a sudden stop. From the back seat of the tonneau stepped forth "Cherub" Devine. It was the most dramatic and opportune entrance he had ever

made in all his career. One glance at the leading figure in the race told him the whole story. Also he saw that he held the key to the situation.

The panting fugitive saw it, too. Once more he halted, stared apprehensively at the "Cherub," then cast a hurried look over his shoulder at Timmins. Quickly he made his choice. Turning like a flash, he dodged Timmins neatly. Another moment, and he had circled around Mrs. Timmins.

Perhaps he would have been doubling and dodging yet, had there not occurred a diversion. The calf, in its excitement, had begun running in a circle and had wound Mr. Hewington up with the rope so that he could move neither hands nor feet. Mr. Hewington was loudly calling for Eppings.

Just then, however, it was Eppings's turn to try stopping the prisoner. He was already jumping from one side of the road

to the other in order to confuse the enemy, when Mr. Hewington's cries for assistance distracted his attention from the game. Years of training showed there. Eppings abandoned his post and started for his master. A yell of rage from Timmins reached his ears. Eppings saw the fugitive about to speed past him. For a second he hesitated. Then, unlimbering his long legs and throwing discretion to the winds, he hurled himself headlong across the road, wrapped his long arms midway about the frock coat, and, amid a cloud of dust, captor and captive came desperately to earth.

As such things go, it was rather a stirring finish. For it was all over. When the others came up and pried the prisoner from the frantic clasp of the highly wrought butler, the captive was quite willing to stand quietly with Timmins's hand grasping his collar, while they both recovered their breath.

"Ow, skittles! But didn't I give 'im a nasty cropper, though?" demanded Eppings pantingly. He was white from exertion and agitation, but his eyes flashed exultingly, and he wanted to boast of his victory. "Didn't I 'ammer 'im down? What?"

"As fine a tackle as I ever saw made," declared the "Cherub." "Eppings, you're a winner. But how did it all happen? How did he get out?"

The Countess Vecchi, who, with the help of Mrs. Timmins, had separated Mr. Hewington from the calf, came up just in time to hear this question asked. Before any one could answer, she had pushed past Eppings, waved Timmins to be silent, and stood glancing from "Cherub" Devine to the prisoner. There was nothing yielding or impulsive in her present manner. She was coldly self-possessed and a trifle haughty.

"I think I can best answer Mr. Devine," said she, with just a suspicion of sarcasm in her tone. "It was I who released this gentleman from the ice house. Timmins, will you please step one side?"

"But, Miss, 'e's such a——"

"Timmins!" reproved the Countess.

"Hands off, Timmins," added the "Cherub."

"Oh, I say, now," protested Eppings, "I can't——"

"Well?" demanded the Countess, turning upon the luckless butler sternly.

"Nothing at all, ma'am. I begs pardon, ma'am."

"You want to let him go, do you, Countess?" queried the "Cherub."

"I do." There was a finality about this response which could hardly be misinterpreted.

"Then scoot," and "Cherub" Devine pointed a chubby thumb over his shoulder.

"I—I can't run any more, really," declared the stranger.

"Well, make it a walk, then," suggested the "Cherub." "You heard the Countess, didn't you? She says you're to go, and she's boss here."

"Thanks," said the ex-prisoner, and with a faint grimace in the very face of the baffled Timmins, he started off.

Somehow, no one seemed to know exactly what to say, so in silence the little group stood watching the unhindered departure of the man who a few moments before had been the centre of such a lively disturbance. Not until he had disappeared around the first curve of the driveway was a word spoken. Then "Cherub" Devine, who had been regarding the averted face of the Countess with a whimsical look in his blue eyes, broke the spell.

"I suppose," he began, "you wonder why we had him shut up in—"

"I understand perfectly," said the Countess. "He told me all about it himself."

"Oh, then you had a talk with him, eh?"

"I did." The Countess was looking steadily at him, and she paused as if to invite criticism of her action.

The "Cherub" shrugged his shoulders. He was beginning to realize that something more than the mere escape of this Count Vecchi had occurred. At first he had attributed her changed attitude towards himself as due to the presence of others, including the Count. It was only natural that she should wish to keep her real feelings to herself. But this pose was too realistic to be comfortable. Either she was overacting her part, or else her coldness was genuine. She and the Count had met and talked.

Could there have been a reconciliation? The "Cherub" could not credit that. Was

it that the reappearance of the Count had influenced her in another way? Was she not trying to keep up appearances before her father and the servants?

"I expect he didn't tell you, though, just why I got so interested in him, did he?" and Mr. Devine favoured the Countess with one of those instantaneous winks of his by which he was wont to express mirthful audacity.

The answering look which the Countess Vecchi flashed back at him was equally expressive, only it conveyed very different emotions.

"He made everything quite clear, Mr. Devine," said the Countess with significant emphasis. "And while I can hardly approve of your motives, I can wish you every success in your new enterprise. Only please do not use our ice house as a prison again;" and while he was still staring at her wonderingly, she had turned and was making her way towards the house.

"Whew! Now I ought to be good, I guess!" exclaimed the bewildered "Cherub."

As he gazed about the little group of mystified persons, he saw Mr. Hewington, still somewhat dazed and a good deal rumpled as to appearance from his recent experience with the calf. It occurred to Mr. Devine that the old gentleman might have said something which would have enlightened his daughter's mind. Taking him by the arm, the "Cherub" led Mr. Hewington down the driveway towards the waiting car. When they were out of earshot of the others he observed casually.

"Well, our Count is loose again."

"Our Count, sir! Why, what do you mean?"

"Now, see here, Hewington, don't *you* go to being mysterious. I'm twisted up enough as it is. You saw Count Vecchi walk off just now, didn't you?"

“Count Vecchi! Where? When?”

There was no question as to the sincerity of his surprise or alarm. The very name seemed to make him shudder.

“Oh, come!” said the “Cherub,” swinging Mr. Hewington into a facing position. “Didn’t we have the Count cooped up, and didn’t the Countess let him out, and didn’t you help chase him all over the lot? And didn’t Eppings nail him with a flying tackle, and then didn’t we let him walk away not three minutes ago, because the Countess said the word? Eh?”

“My dear sir, that person was not Count Vecchi.”

“Wha—a—at! Say, let’s have that again, will you? Wasn’t the Count, did you say?”

“Most certainly not, sir. I will admit that at first I supposed it was the Count, but no sooner had he been captured than I perceived that some one had made a most stupid blunder.”

"But he said he was the Count—told me so himself," insisted the "Cherub."

"My dear Mr. Devine," and Mr. Hewington assumed his most dignified attitude, "if you doubt that I cannot recognize the man who——"

"There, there! I'll take your word for it. You say he isn't the Count, do you?"

"Positively, sir, he is not the Count."

"Then who the devil is he?" exploded the "Cherub."

"That, sir, is a matter in which I am not deeply interested. I do not care to discuss it. I have been bruised and shaken up, and with your permission, sir, I will return to the house."

"Well, I'll be hanged!" was the "Cherub's" only comment as he watched Mr. Hewington walk stiffly away.

A full two minutes he stood there, trying to bring into logical sequence the various unexpected phases of the situation. At

last he summed up the result and observed, for the benefit of his own ears:

"Well, I guess it's all over. She couldn't have me if she wanted to, and wouldn't have me if she could. 'Cherub,' it looks as if you had lost out both ways. But blamed if I wouldn't like to have a talk with that ringer in the silk hat. I wonder which way he went?"

XXII

ONE good reason that Mr. Devine did not see the pseudo Count on his return trip to the city, was that the driver of his car selected a route which did not include the road to the village. It was nearly eight o'clock when he was landed at his hotel, and nine before he had finished dinner.

The "Cherub" had just ordered his second demi-tasse when he heard his name being "paged" through the grill-room. Holding up a forefinger to admit his identity, he was handed a cablegram of four sheets, with toll charges marked "collect." The ever-ready McQuade had lived up to his reputation. In one day he had unearthed all that was to be learned of the history of Count Luigi Salvatore y Vec-

chi. Then he had condensed it with admirable skill, but without sacrificing important details, and had transmitted it to "Cherub" Devine, regardless of expense.

On page one were recorded the facts concerning the birth, parentage and early childhood of the Count. Page two took him on to youth, when he began to have escapades which had become matters of public record. Page three was largely devoted to accounts of his rumoured engagements and brief statements concerning two duels in which he had been concerned. It was while hastily skimming the last sheet that Mr. Devine was moved to exclaim with explosive eagerness: "Ah, ha!" which almost caused a disastrous collision between two tray-laden waiters who happened to be passing. Mr. McQuade's message closed in this manner:

"Sent to private sanitarium in Logos,

Switzerland, Aug. 15, 19---died there Nov. 23, same year. Funeral private, family hushed up affair."

"Nearly two years ago," commented the "Cherub." "Then I believe he's good and dead by this time. But why shouldn't the Hewingtons have known?"

Further speculations were interrupted by the announcement that a person who gave his name as J. Binks was at the desk asking to communicate with Mr. Devine. He mentioned that he was connected with some agency or other. Did Mr. Devine wish to see the person?

"Sure," said the "Cherub." "Tell him to trot in."

Mr. J. Binks, a bristly-haired man with an undershot jaw and narrow-set eyes, tiptoed apologetically in among the tables.

"Excuse me," he whispered hoarsely, "but we got your gent, all right. He was

walkin' out as cool as you like, too, sir, when we nabbed him."

"The deuce you say! Sure you got the right one?"

"Oh, yes, sir. Trust us for that. . . . Silk lid, frock coat, black moustache, five feet six, looks like a foreign gent, but talks straight enough. No mistake, sir. And what's the charge, eh? Breakin' and enterin'?"

"No. Breaking out and leaving would be nearer. Make any fuss when you got him?"

"He was a bit hot under the collar, sir, when we first gives him the grip; said he never saw a country place so full of surprises as that one in all——"

"He's right about that," assented Mr. Devine hastily. "But what have you done with him?"

"Just what was botherin' us, sir. Generally we has papers and takes 'em to the

nearest station house. But in this case, as I says to the Chief, 'Chief,' says I, 'this is the peculiarest——'"

"Yes, it is a little odd," broke in the "Cherub." "But where's your man now?"

"Outside, sir, 'cuffed to Mr. Coogan, my side partner. Now if you would step around to the sergeant's desk and swear out——"

"But I can't, Mr. Binks. You and Coogan have done well. Here, split that between you," and Mr. Devine insinuated a yellow-backed note into an anticipatory palm. "Now all you have to do is unchain your man from Mr. Coogan, lead him in here, and leave him with me."

"And there ain't no charge?"

"None at all, Mr. Binks. All I want is his company for a few minutes."

"Well, I'm jiggered, I am!"

Mr. Binks looked it, but he soon recovered sufficiently to retire in good order and

reappear with the much-captured individual whom the "Cherub" had first met dodging about the gateway of Hewington Acres.

The bogus Count seemed rather meek and subdued. Also much of his dapper, well-groomed appearance had disappeared. His clothes were wrinkled and dusty, his shirt bosom rumpled, and he was in need of a shave. With some hesitation he slid into the chair opposite Mr. Devine and watched with a puzzled stare as the "Cherub" waved a dismissal to the equally mystified Binks.

"Well?" observed the "Cherub." "How do you like playing the prodigal Count rôle? Kind of strenuous, eh?"

A shrug of the shoulder was the only response to this.

"Now don't let's be grouchy over it," went on Mr. Devine coaxingly. "Whatever your little game was, it's queered. You fooled me all right; but of course you could-

n't fool Mr. Hewington or the Countess. What was the idea, anyway?"

"I was just joking. I'm going to make you smart for your share in this, Mr. 'Cherub' Devine."

"Of course you are. That's only natural. You'll bring suit for damages and all that sort of thing, and I'll have to have you arrested on a charge of attempted blackmail; and between us we'll keep the courts busy for a year. I have that all figured out. But what do you say to a good dinner first?"

An involuntary rolling of the eyes toward the menu card betrayed the fact that the suggestion was a pleasing one.

"How would a nice thick sirloin, with mushrooms and baked potatoes, strike you? And a few Little Necks to start on, eh? Good! Here, waiter!"

Having given the order, Mr. Devine puffed thoughtfully on his cigar for a mo-

ment or two, the man on the other side of the table meanwhile eyeing him with furtive inquiry. Apparently the "Cherub" was unobservant. Suddenly, however, Mr. Devine asked abruptly:

"Well? Got me all sized up? Then let's get down to facts. What's your real bona fide name, anyway?"

The man flushed a little, squirmed uneasily in his chair, and then recovered his self-possession with a short laugh.

"Is it worth a dinner to know?"

"Oh, the dinner's my treat. I'm just trying to fix things so we'll understand each other, that's all. You needn't feel obliged to tell me who you are, you know."

"Suppose," and a pair of piercing dark eyes watched for the effect shrewdly, "suppose I came direct from Count Vecchi, as his personal repre——"

"Won't do," interrupted Mr. Devine, "unless you can show your pass from the

Old Boy. You see, I know just how long the Count's been dead."

The man smiled and made a slight gesture of impatience.

"If you had taken the trouble to ask Mr. Hewington, he would have told you how mistaken you were."

"Yes, but I'm better posted than Mr. Hewington. There are the latest returns," and the "Cherub" tossed over the last sheet of McQuade's message.

He really had the makings of a first-class villain in him, this nameless personage across the table. Seeing that further pretence along this line was useless, he merely shrugged his shoulders indifferently.

"I might have known you would find out. But what of it?"

"Why, not much," answered the "Cherub" slowly. "Only—only this: Some one's been holding up the old gentleman for remittances ever since the Count

died, using the Count's name. Of course, I'm not sure who that somebody was, but the arrow points to you. How about it, eh?"

In spite of the pleasant curves about "Cherub" Devine's mouth, and the rounded smoothness of his pink cheeks, he could at times convey an impression of great determination, and from his blue eyes could come keen glances. The man across the table noted these things. His air of indifference vanished. He fumbled nervously with the table silver. Inside of two minutes he had broken down completely and was making a full confession, to which "Cherub" Devine listened with placid satisfaction and indulgent nods of encouragement.

The interview ended amicably. By the time it was over the ex-prisoner had recovered his composure and developed an appetite for sirloin steak. Also he had accepted Mr. Devine's offer to become his guest for the night.

XXIII

AND early next morning there arrived at Hewington Acres once more a cheerfully audacious "Cherub" Devine, who seemed quite unaffected by the forbidding austerity with which Eppings chose to regard him.

"Countess around, eh?" asked Mr. Devine.

"The Countess Vecchi, sir?"

"Sure enough, Eppings. That's the particular Countess I had in my mind."

"I will see, sir," and Eppings moved off, limping slightly, to investigate.

"Sorry, sir, but the Countess Vecchi begs to be excused, sir," was his report.

Mr. Devine did not seem greatly surprised by this rebuff. He grinned at the butler good-humouredly.

"Well, well! That's sad, isn't it, Ep-

pings? Now, what about the old gentleman?"

"Mr. Hewington, sir?"

"Another bull's-eye, Eppings. You tell him it's important."

After some moments, during which he paced up and down the reception hall, Mr. Devine was shown into the library with as much formality as if this was his first visit. Nor was the attitude of Mr. Hewington, when he rose to receive the "Cherub," at all reassuring.

"Pardon me," he began coldly, "but I had been led to believe that—er—I hardly expected, you know, that——"

"Yes, I'm up on all that," broke in Mr. Devine. "Thought you'd seen the last of me? But you want to get over such thoughts. I've got the habit, it seems."

"Er—er—yes, so it would seem, Mr. Devine. But Eppings brought word that your business was important."

"Eppings is always right, as far as he goes. Important to me, he should have said. Maybe you'll be interested, too."

"Ah?" Mr. Hewington seated himself and indicated that Mr. Devine might take a chair also if he wished. Mr. Devine preferred to stand.

"I've been looking up that Count of yours," he remarked. Mr. Hewington became interested at once.

"Yes, yes?" he urged. "And he is——"

"No, he *was*. He's been defunct for nearly two years. I had a man investigate the records, and it's all O. K."

"Impossible, Mr. Devine! Why—why—I have been in communication with him."

"That was your mistake. You've been in communication with a smooth young chap who couldn't resist the chance to play a new bunco game for all it was worth. How were the letters signed which came from

the Count after he was sent to that sanitarium?"

"By his secretary, I believe. Per F. C. That was it."

"Sure! And the F. C. stood for François Cunetto. I've had a heart-to-heart talk with François, and got his whole history. It helps a lot to know a man from the ground up, don't it?"

"I have no doubt it does, Mr. Devine, but——"

"Oh, I'm coming to that; but I want to put Cunetto's case to you first. As you might guess by his name, he's half French and half Italian, which is not a bad combination. There was good blood on both sides, but no money on either, so that's why he didn't finish the medical course that he came over here to take. When his funds ran out he goes back to Italy, drifts up into Switzerland, and gets a job as assistant house doctor in this sanitarium where they

were trying to cure Count Vecchi of seeing pink-whiskered tadpoles and other variegated fauna."

"Really, now, Mr. Devine!" protested Mr. Hewington.

"Why shy so at the facts?" asked the "Cherub." "Count or no Count, that was his complaint. Why, his nerves were in such shape he couldn't even sign his name to a letter. And that's where young Dr. Cunetto was let in. When the Count's remittance from you was overdue, he dictates a letter to François. He gets him to cash your check, too, and François learns the whole story about the runaway Countess and her rich father. Then the Count dies. A delayed check comes in, and the doctor is tempted to see that the money isn't wasted. Also he observes that the passing of the Count is kept quiet. It occurs to him that you hadn't been notified of the sad event. That being the case, he sees no reason why

the remittances shouldn't continue, so he keeps you posted on the dates when they're due. See how it works out? ””

“ Why, the scoundrel! ” exclaimed Mr. Hewington. “ I've been swindled! I shall write to him at once and——”

“ No need to write. He's over here. He's coming to call on you this afternoon.”

“ The impudent rascal! Why, I—I shall have him apprehended.” In the expression of righteous indignation Mr. Hewington could be picturesquely impressive. Mr. Devine paused to watch with tempered appreciation before replying.

“ I hope not,” said the “ Cherub ” mildly. “ That would complicate things. We didn't treat him very well the last time he was here.”

“ The last time? ” echoed Mr. Hewington.

“ Yes. He was the chap we had shut up in the ice house, you know. He was scout-

ing around to see what style you lived in before he played his cards."

"The unprincipled wretch!"

"He isn't as honest as he might be; but then, circumstances have been against him."

"I shall refuse to hear a word from him, sir!" declared Mr. Hewington.

"Now, that's too bad. He's coming to refund the amount he tricked you out of. You see, I've taken him on my private staff and advanced him six months' pay, so he could start square. Isn't that better than getting into a legal snarl with him, eh?"

"But I fail to understand, Mr. Devine. What is your motive in doing this?"

Obviously the "Cherub" did not relish making a detailed explanation, but the attitude of Mr. Hewington seemed to demand it.

"It has something to do with the Countess," he confessed.

"The Countess! Pray, Mr. Devine,

kindly leave my daughter out of this discussion."

"Not much!" declared the "Cherub." "Say, you might just as well get used to it now as later. I think a whole lot of your daughter, Mr. Hewington."

That the last of the Hewingtons did not choke with anger or explode from suppressed indignation, was due to a marvellous effort at self control.

"Indeed, sir! Your impudence is astounding. I trust that you are not so presumptuous as to suppose that your—er—your regard is in any measure returned?"

"That just describes the case, Mr. Hewington. At least, I did have some such idea until this fool François muddled things up for me. Do you know what he told the Countess?"

"I am not at all interested, sir."

"Maybe not, but I want you to listen, just the same; and I want you to let him

tell his revised story to the Countess. Why, see here, she thinks I locked that chap up because I was interested in his wife. Says he didn't mean to tell any such yarn, but he was posing as the Count, and she couldn't see him, and it just naturally slipped out. Nice position to put me in, wasn't it?"

But Mr. Hewington shook his head mulishly. He did not understand, thought the Countess would not care to hear Dr. Cunetto's explanation as to who he really was.

"But, great Scott!" protested the "Cherub." "He meant that I was in love with the Countess. He'd guessed that much. And say, he guessed right. I've been in love with her ever since the first minute I saw her, and it's getting worse every hour. I don't know just how it is with her. She's never had a fair chance to say yet; but now that I've found out that Count of yours is out of the way, I mean

to ask her once more if she thinks I'll do."

"Well, Cherub, why don't you?"

From behind a tall revolving bookcase which hid from view a corner of the library, appeared the Countess Vecchi, flushed and smiling. Her brown eyes were alight, yet a mischievous smile played about her mouth corners.

"Adèle!" came from Mr. Hewington.

"I've been listening, you see," she confessed. "I couldn't help it. I came in to find father, and I heard you telling him about that—that man you had locked up. The one who told you he was Count—"

"Yes, but let's forget him," said the "Cherub." "There isn't any Count, glory be!"

"I know," said the Countess. "I understand now. I heard all you said."

"Did you? Honest?" demanded Mr. Devine eagerly. "About how I—I—"

The Countess Vecchi nodded and her dark eyes drooped.

"Then I guess there's something I want to say all over again right now. That is, Mr. Hewington, if you wouldn't mind—er—" and he glanced suggestively at the library door.

Mr. Hewington gasped. From "Cherub" Devine he looked towards his daughter.

"Oh, run along, Daddy," urged the Countess.

Mr. Hewington did not run. He rose, lifted his hands as if to give vent to more protests; then changed his mind, looked once more at each of them, sighed a sigh of resignation, and retreated from the scene as one in a daze.

For a moment or two the "Cherub" neither moved nor spoke. He simply stood there and gazed at the Countess Vecchi. All his audacity and self-confidence had vanished. He was gazing wistfully and eagerly at her, as if he was afraid that in

